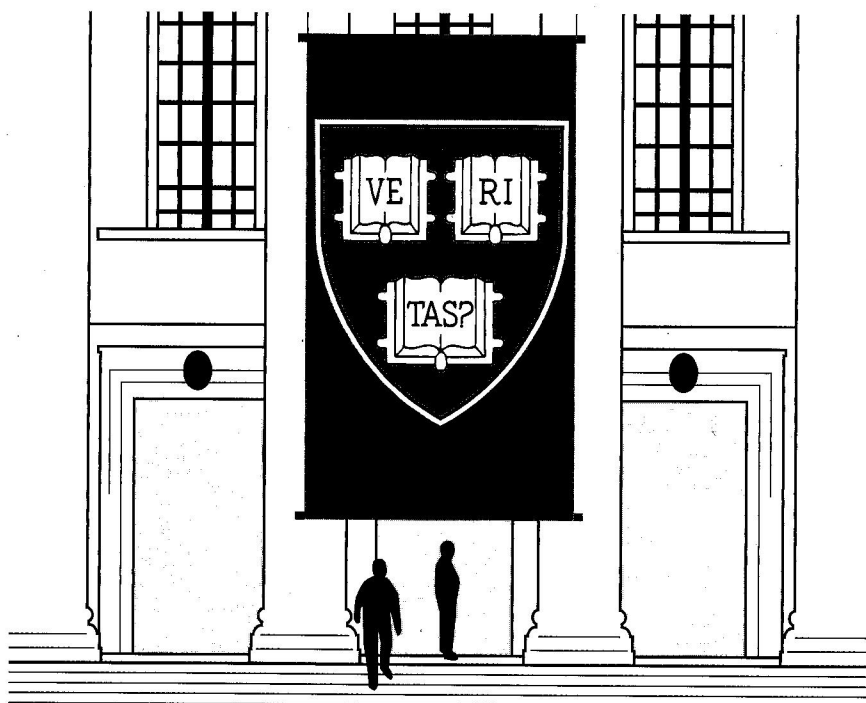


Education



Cheating Harvard. A class known for easy A's raises some hard questions

By Kayla Webley

THEY COULD USE THEIR NOTES, BOOKS AND EVEN THE INTERNET, but working together was forbidden: "Students may not discuss the exam with others," the directions explicitly stated at the top of the take-home final last spring. Some 125 students at Harvard University have been accused of breaking this rule, and as the investigation proceeds, some of those students have reportedly threatened to sue the school if they are severely punished. Regardless of the outcome, allegations of widespread cheating at what is perhaps the world's most prestigious university raise serious questions about student ethics and the blurry line between collaboration and cheating.

The university has not named the course, but the *Harvard Crimson* identified it as Government 1310: Introduction to Congress. It was supposed to be an easy A, at least according to evaluations from students who had taken it in previous years. But the glowing reviews changed this spring. In Harvard's Q Guide, an anonymous database of students' course evaluations, commenters noted that the four take-home exams—each worth 25% of the final grade—had become noticeably harder. The tests were described as being esoteric and unrelated to the professor's lectures. Some students reportedly asked teaching assistants to help explain an unfamiliar term used on the final, which included several short-answer questions as well as an essay. A sophomore who took the course told the

Crimson he was asked by fellow students if he wanted to work together on the exam. In all, nearly half of the 279 students enrolled in the course have been accused of committing acts of academic dishonesty that range from inappropriate collaboration to outright plagiarism because they submitted answers that were either identical or "too close for comfort."

Why would so many high achievers allegedly ignore a professor's directive not to work together? "Students today seem much more willing and able to make their own rules," says Donald McCabe, a Rutgers University professor who has surveyed student attitudes about cheating since 1990. "What a faculty member says is a suggestion for many of them." Take-home exams can add to that temptation; they are designed to give students time to craft thoughtful answers, but they create a situation in which the rules are more easily broken than in tests administered under a proctor's eye—and one in which students working from similar class notes might be more apt to produce similar results.

When Harvard in late August announced its investigation, an administrator made clear that the school will work to improve academic integrity on campus. Harvard is considering adding an honor code, a pledge against lying, cheating and stealing that some schools require in order to leave little doubt about what is expected of students. In his research, McCabe has found that schools that have these codes appear to have fewer incidents of cheating than schools that don't have them.

But in the short term, each of the accused students is meeting with Harvard's administrative board—the real-life version of the group that admonished Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network*—which will decide whether to punish them. The strictest penalty they face is a year's suspension or, for those who have graduated, a revocation of their degree. As the students await the verdicts, some are floating the idea of going to court. Such lawsuits have had a dampening effect on universities' willingness to pursue academic-dishonesty cases in the first place, says Teddi Fishman, director of the Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University. "When something like this hits the news, the value of everyone's diploma decreases." ■

62%

Percentage of undergraduate students who admitted in 2010–11 surveys to cheating on either tests or papers, according to a Rutgers professor who studies student attitudes