

Why academic cheating is all about economics (essay)

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The Economy of Cheating

Colleges and universities may try to address academic cheating as a moral or pedagogical problem, but it's really about something entirely different, argues Carol Poster.

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By

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Students cheat. Educators struggle to respond, sometimes blaming themselves for not making courses sufficiently interesting or relevant and sometimes engaging in a battle of wits or technologies with their students to prevent cheating. Sometimes we in higher education try to address cheating as a moral problem and sometimes as a pedagogical one. Another way to understand cheating, however, is to borrow an insight from Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, namely, "It's the economy, stupid."

The Students

More than half the students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States work. Let us imagine a typical student, Norm Normal, a business major at a comprehensive university who earns \$9 per hour from a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant. He is enduring an elective course on Women in World Literature that quite efficiently satisfies one humanities and two multiculturalism requirements. The instructor has inflicted an assignment of a 1,500-word paper on her students.

Norm has a choice. In order to get the B grade he would like in the course, he would need to spend a total of 20 hours completing assigned readings and writing the paper. As Norm does not enjoy chick lit and rarely manages better than a C in English courses, he knows that the 20-odd hours he would need to complete the assignment might not pay off. Also, as a business major, he is aware that in the same 20 hours, he could earn \$180 at his job.

He has a choice of dozens of different websites that offer either canned papers or custom-written papers from \$10 to \$20 per page. If he can buy a paper for \$80 from a term-paper site, he has, effectively, come out \$100 ahead compared to investing the time in writing the paper himself. Cheating is simply a rational choice.

Student cheating is not just limited to buying term papers. Websites offer everything students need to succeed in their course work -- from tutoring to proofreading and from answering questions to supplying canned summaries and analyses. If Marie Antoinette Gateau, for example, is assigned a paper on the economic causes of the French Revolution, she can visit any number of sites that she finds through Google, ask questions about the topic and receive 150- to 200-word answers from educators, allowing her to devote her time to milking cows or improving her wardrobe rather than researching the topic herself.

If Tom Finn has a test on *Hamlet*, rather than reading the entire play, he can access extended summaries online -- either before the test or with discreet peeks at his mobile phone during the exam. Similarly, a student needing help

with a complex set of scientific or math problems can receive step-by-step assignment help. In all of these cases, the fees required to access the sites may be substantially less than the amount of money the students can earn in the hours they would need to spend reading, studying, calculating or writing to complete the assignments themselves.

The Educators

The vast network of question and term-paper sites on the Internet cater to a simple economic reality of specialization of labor. Let us look now at Annie Abd, the author of Norm's paper. She might earn a premium salary of \$3,000 per course as an adjunct. Assuming Annie works an average of 10 hours a week on that course, including preparation, grading and contact hours, she earns \$18.75 an hour over a 16-week term. Since Annie has already read the assigned books for Norm's paper, she can probably knock out an adequate 1,500-word undergraduate paper in under three hours. If she is paid \$50 for the paper Norm bought from a term-paper site for \$80, she is making close to \$17 an hour. Factoring in commuting time and costs, writing term papers may actually pay slightly more than her adjunct teaching.

The same applies to answering questions such as "Who is the protagonist of *Othello*?" or "What were the main ideas of the Stoics?" on student answer sites. At rates of \$3 to \$15 for a 150- to 300-word answer, most people with advanced degrees can easily earn more than \$20 per hour. Summary sites may pay \$400-\$500 for extended book summaries, rates also competitive with adjunct salaries. For unemployed Ph.D.s, graduate students or underpaid adjuncts and junior faculty, working for student help sites is a convenient income supplement. Even better, it is one of the few professions where an M.A. or Ph.D. is actually a useful credential.

Doing the Math (Homework)

Engaging in an arms race of policing technology versus cheating technology solves nothing. It merely results in faculty members and administrators diverting their time from actual teaching and scholarship to cheating detection, as cheaters deploy increasingly sophisticated technological hacks to avoid being caught. Although better detection technology may temporarily change the economic equation, making cheating more expensive or increasing the risk of being caught, the underlying economics remain the same.

Realistically, it makes perfect sense for a student to outsource production of papers or exam answers to experts, just as a shoe company might outsource production of shoes. If the point is to produce a thing -- whether a shoe or term paper -- as well and efficiently as possible, the principle of specialization of labor applies. A graduate student or underemployed Ph.D. writing for a term-paper site can create better papers in less time than most undergraduates. It makes perfect economic sense for undergraduates who have other skills and career aspirations to outsource the producing of term papers and test answers to academic experts and focus on their own goals or careers instead.

In addition, there is the matter of supply and demand. As more students attend college, and as academic employment becomes increasingly precarious, both the demand for student help sites and the available supply of educators to work at such sites increases. That reduces the cost of papers and student answers and increases the number of workers available to help students.

Rather than blaming lazy students or bad teaching for the growth of Internet-facilitated student cheating, we must remember that "it's the economy, stupid." We must change the underlying economy of cheating. Some of the possible ways to do that might include creating for undergraduates extended individualized oral and written exams of the sort we do in Ph.D. comprehensives or perhaps even eliminating grades entirely, thereby decoupling the functions of teaching and evaluating students -- solutions that I'll elaborate on in a follow-up article. Otherwise, no matter how much we wring our hands, police our classrooms or moralize, cheating will continue to proliferate.

Bio

Carol Poster is a historian of rhetoric and a freelance writer who taught for many years at Florida State University

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