

Harvard cheating should shake us up, too

February 24, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

We were close to the eve of Chinese New Year here when a shocking report of a cheating scandal at Harvard University made international headlines, thanks to an article in the New York Times on Feb. 1, 2013.

Harvard University may seem far from Taipei, Taichung, or Kaohsiung, but think again. This is a story with many a lesson for our universities and local society.

The story begins with a final exam in May of 2012 for 279 Harvard students in a course called "Introduction to Congress." Assistant professor Matthew B. Platt taught the course with the help of a crew of teaching fellows who were graduate students. We usually call these "fellows" "teaching assistants."

The point about the assistants is important because investigation afterwards revealed the assistants themselves were unclear about how much "help" they were allowed to give students asking questions. The meaning of "collaboration" (which the exam directions explicitly forbade) was apparently unclear. Approximately 70 of the students in the course were suspected of cheating in the take-home exam. After Harvard's investigation, which lasted eight months, more than half of the 70 had to withdraw from the university for a period of 2 to 4 semesters. Semesters, I say, not weeks or months.

Judgment on the behavior of the remaining 35 or so varied. Harvard put about half of the 35 on academic probation, and found the others innocent of wrongdoing. The New York Times report deserves quotation.

"Administrators said that on final exam questions, some students supplied identical answers, down to, in some cases, typographical errors, indicating that they had written them together or plagiarized them. But some students claimed that the similarities ... were due to sharing notes or sitting in sessions with the same teaching fellows."

I highly recommend a response to this situation by Amherst College Economics professor Daniel Barbezat, available on the Internet at "Courses as Commodities: the Harvard Cheating Scandal."

Professor Barbezat argues that a key issue in cheating such as this lies in the inability of students to see specific courses as personally relevant to them. "If students see no true purpose in their courses and cannot relate the material in them to their own lives ... we will see growth in this sort of behavior," he writes. According to Barbezat a number of students nowadays view courses "merely as commodities (they 'shop' for classes and report to the 'Chief Information Officer')."

My Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines "commodity" in stark, almost scary terms: "a product that is bought and sold" (p. 332).

For how many of my students, I wonder, am I only a merchant, then, and not a teacher, which is to say, a true educator? How are my colleagues and I to understand what it is we are supposed to offer our young friends? This education we endeavor to share, tell me: Is it a thing to be measured and evaluated, an object to be bought and sold like a desk or a car or a bag of oranges? The cheating at Harvard, and its aftermath, provide us with opportunities for reflection on questions such as these.

There is of course more here to ponder.

After painstaking scrutiny and interviews with scores of students, teaching assistants and faculty members, Harvard was willing to tell up to 35 of its students that their dishonest behavior had cost them the privilege, for a time, of studying at their prestigious university. Kicking students out of school for up to two years sends out a remarkable signal. How many universities elsewhere in the United States (or in Taiwan) would have the moral courage to take a stand like that in favor of academic honesty?

We are also left with the reminder of our own responsibility as instructors to communicate as forcefully as possible with students about the value we personally see in the courses we teach. The commodity-attitude that unfortunately is so prevalent on our local scene, and the obsession with "learning skills" for the job market, about which we hear ad nauseam, are also among the issues the Harvard story urges us to contemplate.

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