Focus
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

How Students Cheat in a High-Tech World

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CHEATING HAS ALWAYS involved elaborate schemes, but now they are increasingly complex and multinational – and sometimes quite expensive. Our reporters look at how students in the United States use Google searches to find surrogates in Kenya or the Philippines to do their work for them, and how those surrogates can raise their standard of living by writing one paper after another. Cheating technology has also infiltrated classrooms, with social-media sites sometimes acting as vehicles for sharing correct test responses. This collection of articles prepares educators for new challenges in stemming a tide of deception that could undermine the value of college degrees.

Cover photo by Jonathan Barkat for *The Chronicle Review*

The New Cheating Economy

By BRAD WOLVERTON

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN BARKAT FOR THE CHRONICLE

Fifteen credits were all he needed. That's what the school district in California where Adam Sambrano works as a career-guidance specialist required for a bump in pay. But when he saw the syllabus for a graduate course he'd enrolled in last year at Arizona State University, he knew he was in trouble.

Among the assignments was a 19-page paper, longer than anything he'd ever written. The idea of that much research worried Mr. Sambrano, who also spends time serving in the Army National Guard.

Before the class started, he went on Craigslist and enlisted the service of a professional cheater. For $1,000 — less than the monthly housing allowance he was receiving through the GI Bill, he says — Mr. Sambrano hired a stranger to take his entire course.

He transferred $500 upfront, "From Adam for ASU," according to a receipt obtained by *The Chronicle*. Then he just waited for the cheater to do his work.

On any given day, thousands of students go online seeking academic relief. They are first-years and transfers overwhelmed by the curriculum, international students with poor English skills, lazy undergrads with easy access to a credit card. They are nurses, teachers, and government workers too busy to pursue the advanced degrees they've decided they need.

In studies, as many as half of college students say they'd be willing to purchase an assignment.

The Chronicle spoke with people who run cheating companies and those who do the cheating. The demand has been around for decades. But the industry is in rapid transition.

Just as higher education is changing, embracing a revolution in online learning, the cheating business is transforming as well, finding new and more insidious ways to undermine academic integrity.

A decade ago, cheating consisted largely of students' buying papers off the internet. That's still where much of the money is. But in recent years, a new underground economy has emerged, offering any academic service a student could want. Now it's not just a paper or one-off assignment. It's the quiz next week, the assignment after that, the answers served up on the final. Increasingly, it's the whole class. And if students are paying someone to take one course, what's stopping them from buying their entire degree?

The whole-class market is maturing fast. More than a dozen websites now specialize in taking entire online courses, including BoostMyGrade.com, OnlineClassHelp.com, and TakeYourClass.com. One of them, NoNeedtoStudy.com, advertises that it has completed courses for more than 11,000 students at such colleges as Duke, Michigan State, even Harvard.

As cheating companies expand their reach, colleges have little incentive to slow their growth. There's no money in catching the cheaters. But there's a lot of money in upping enrollment.

Two professors at Western Carolina University were so concerned about the encroachment of cheating that they set up a fake online class to learn more about the industry's tactics, and see what they could detect.

About a dozen students agreed to enroll in the introductory psychology course, including John Baley, then a graduate student in clinical psychology. They were provided with fake names, email addresses, and ID numbers, plus a pot of money for cheating services. Half were asked to cheat, and they did so in a variety of ways, collaborating inappropriately with classmates, buying papers, and paying others to take tests.

Mr. Baley went looking for a company to take the whole class for him. He typed a few words into his browser — "cheat for me in my online class" — and turned up dozens of results. Many sites seemed untrustworthy: Their content was misspelled or grammatically incorrect, or their customer-service reps had trouble with basic English. Some requested confidential banking information or asked him to enter it into a website with no security protection.

But one company impressed him. Its representatives responded promptly, explained how their colleagues would complete the course, and guaranteed a B or better — or his money back. He agreed to pay the company $900, half upfront, and handed over his course username and password.

Over the next 10 weeks, the company, which Mr. Baley declined to name, to protect any further research, passed him from the customer-service staff to the management team to the person who took his course. At each stage, he says, he dealt with

LISSA GOTWALLS FOR THE CHRONICLE

John Baley, now a law student, hired a company to complete all of his work in a fake online class that professors at Western Carolina U. had set up as a research experiment. The professors — who were on the lookout for cheaters — didn't catch him.

people who were efficient, responsive, and reliable. In fact, the cheaters performed better than he thought they would. They completed every assignment without prompting, at one point providing a written script for a video presentation with less than 36 hours' notice.

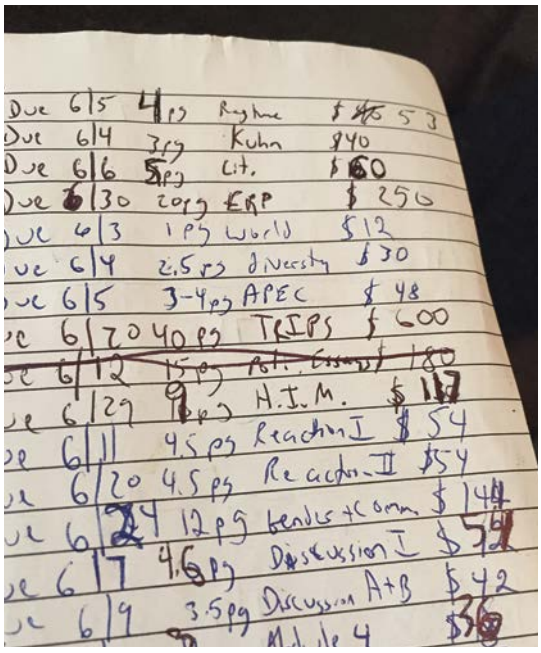
The instructors, Alvin Malesky, an associate professor of psychology, and Robert Crow, an assistant professor of educational research, used Turnitin and Google to check students' work for plagiarism and monitored them to see if groups were taking exams at the same time.

The professors caught several students plagiarizing material. But they didn't spot the paid test takers, purchased papers, or coordinated assignments. And they had no clue that a person in New York to whom Mr. Baley had mailed his books was behind the A's they were giving.

Even when professors knew that students were cheating, and were trying to catch them, they came up short.

Mr. Baley's only frustration was with the barrage of marketing he got. His Facebook and Instagram feeds were saturated with ads for cheating companies, he says. That didn't let up for months.

Two years after the company took his class, its representatives are still trying to enlist him to refer other students as clients.



CHRONICLE PHOTO BY BRAD WOLVERTON

A professional cheater's little black book of assignments shows the work he performed for students over the course of several weeks

Like any underground industry, academic cheating has its share of sloppy opportunists and savvy operators. Most work in the shadows. Click on a website that offers academic work for hire, and you'll probably find little information about the people or company behind it. The owners often use aliases and mislead prospective customers with fake addresses and exaggerated claims.

No Need to Study LLC lists its corporate address as 19 East 52nd Street, in New York,, but complaints filed with the Better Business Bureau say that address does not exist. A representative for the company said in an email that it is a virtual business offering services exclusively online and does not have an office open to the public. A dissertation-writing service that claims to be based in Chicago seems to operate out of Pakistan. "In order to create a best academic assignment that rank #1 among other assignments," its website says, "then you will seek for a dedicated and experienced writer's help."

Even more-established companies can be difficult to track down. The headquarters of one, Student Network Resources, appears to be in the middle of a New Jersey cornfield. A half-mile away, in a generic strip mall, it maintains a post-office box in a packing-and-shipping store. The owner of the store says he forwards the mail to Florida. It goes to the company's founder and president, Mark DeGaeta.

Mr. DeGaeta got the idea for Student Network Resources in the late 1990s, when he was still in high school, he says in an email to *The Chronicle*. Over the years, he has registered more than a dozen domains, including PaperDue.com and HelpMyEssay.com, which funnel work to his company, whose name is relatively unknown.

When students place a request through one of the sites, they enter their name, email address, and as much information about the assignment as possible, including due date and level (undergraduate, master's, or doctoral). That information goes into Student Network's system, where a price is set based on the difficulty of the assignment. The job is posted to a private board for writers, stripped of any personal details about the student. From there, a willing writer picks up the order and corresponds with the client through a private channel in which students often disclose personal information about themselves and their courses. Then the writer delivers the completed assignment.

Mr. DeGaeta is mum about the revenue he has brought in, but the business appears to be lucrative. Two longtime writers say they've earned as much as $10,000 a month. At peak times, the company says on its website, most of its 150 writers earn more than $1,800 a week. Writers typically pocket half the price of an order; the company gets the rest. If those numbers are accurate, annual revenue for Student Network Resources would be in the millions. The company has only two employees.

The founder has made a good living, according to public records. He owns an apartment in a tony neighborhood of New York, near the United Nations building, and seems to reside near Miami Beach. But his business has fallen off in recent years, he says, as the industry has expanded overseas.

The company emphatically denies that it is a cheating service. It says it tells customers that they may not use its material for academic credit — and requires them to acknowledge as much before purchasing papers, during the research process, and before receiving the work. "We vehemently protect our copyright," Mr. DeGaeta said in a written statement. "If the customer decides to use our material as a reference they must cite Student Network Resources Inc."

Several current and former writers told *The Chronicle* that they had believed that. Amelia Albanese, a former community-college tutor who worked for the company in 2010, says she thought she was writing sample papers for tutors and teachers. When she realized she was doing students' work, she quit.

"I worked at a college," she says, "and if the students I worked with had cheated, I would have been furious."

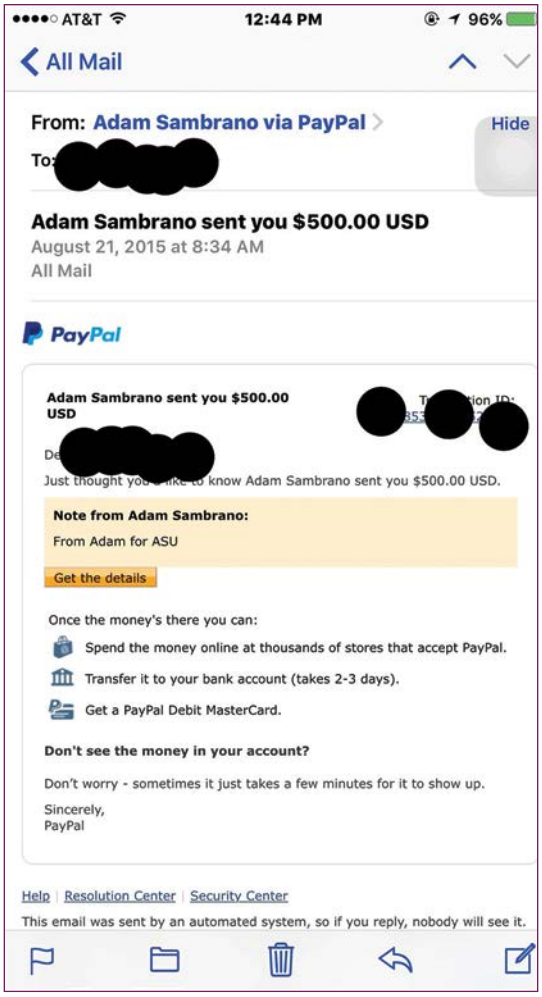
The company's business depends on covering its tracks. A memo it sent to writers last year gives step-by-step instructions for wiping the metadata from documents they produce.

"Every document that you submit must have 100% blank 'Summary' properties," the memo says. "You can make the 'Author' field (and other fields) blank by default for all new documents by going to 'Preferences' --> 'User Information' and replacing the content of the 'First:' and 'Last:' fields with a blank space."

According to Mr. DeGaeta, the memo was aimed at preventing writers from poaching clients. But if there's no trace of a cheater on a document, a college has no way of knowing — or if an instructor suspects something, no proof — that the student didn't do the work.

Cheating has become second nature to many students. In studies, more than two-thirds of college students say they've cheated on an assignment. As many as half say they'd be willing to purchase one. To them, higher education is just another transaction, less about learning than about obtaining a credential.

The market, which includes hundreds of websites and apps, offers a slippery slope of options. Students looking for class notes and sample tests can find years' worth on Koofers.com, which archives exams from dozens of colleges. And a grow-



Adam Sambrano, a career-guidance specialist for a school district in California, paid a professional cheater he found on Craigslist to take a graduate course at Arizona State University for him.

ing number of companies, including Course Hero and Chegg, offer online tutoring that attempts to stay above the fray (one expert calls such services a "gateway drug").

Many students turn to websites like Yahoo Answers or Reddit to find solutions to homework problems. And every month, hundreds of students put assignments up for bid on Freelancer.com and Upwork, where they might get a paper written for the cost of a few lattes.

It's not uncommon for students to disclose personal details in their orders, which anyone online can see. This spring a student from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte included an attachment to his Upwork order that identified his institution and the introductory philosophy class he was looking for help in. A few days later, a Ph.D. candidate in Britain went on the same site to solicit help with his dissertation. A document he attached to his order included his name and his adviser's.

Some of the most explicit exchanges happen on Craigslist, which has become a hub of cheating activity. Over two days in April, *The Chronicle* analyzed Craigslist posts in seven cities in which a cheater or cheating service offered to complete whole courses for students. The search turned up more than 200 ads. In many cases, the same ads ran in multiple cities, suggesting a coordinated marketing effort.

Craigslist posters appealed to students by acknowledging how little time they had for busywork. "Online classes are a pain in the ass," said one Chicago-area ad. Others outright asked students to hand over their online credentials. "You can trust us with your login and password information," said a Phoenix post. "We will do every section of your online class including discussion boards, tests, assignments, and quizzes."

The Chronicle exchanged messages with several Craigslist posters to inquire about the cost of their service and how it worked. One person who has posted regularly in the Los Angeles area said he had been in business for 10 years and had a staff of "over 20 experts." His prices, he said, depended on the number of hours it would take to complete a class, not how well a student wanted to do.

"We always get A's and B's," he said in a text message. "Calculation based classes are $750. All others are $600. Anyone quoting different is not a pro and doesn't know what they are doing. Cheap quotes = F grades.

"Oh," he added, "and you can split up the payments."

Another poster said his prices depended on the institution. "A course from Penn State World Campus requires more effort than a course from Post University," he said in an email. "Previously, I completed a remedial English course for a client at Kaplan University. This person requested a 'B' for $90/week for eight weeks. Another client at a Cal State University required an 'A' in a four week upper division Asian Studies course for $300/week."

The most common way students cheat is through a simple web search — typing, for example, "essay," "essay help," or "write my essay." As many as half of the visits to some sites used for cheating come through search engines, *The Chronicle* found.

The companies that have made the biggest strides in the business have mastered the search game. Search-engine optimization efforts have helped Ultius, founded in 2011, grow fast.

The Delaware-based company, with a call center

in Las Vegas, has hired more than 40 employees, including engineers and customer-service representatives, according to job ads. It has contracted with more than 1,400 writers.

That growth has coincided with a surge in traffic. Over a recent three-month stretch, the site drew about 520,000 visits, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of data compiled by SimilarWeb. Thirty to 40 percent of Ultius's traffic comes from students' web searches, according to estimates on Alexa, which measures internet usage. Ultius is the No. 1 or No. 2 search result that pops up when someone Googles "buy a term paper," "buy a research paper," or about a dozen other phrases that indicate an intent to purchase a completed assignment, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of search data compiled by Spyfu, a search-engine optimization tool.

Boban Dedovic, 27, the company's chairman, helped start it after three semesters as a student at the University of Maryland at College Park, during which he worked as a tutor. To him, Ultius is a technology company that connects customers to writers, he says via email.

He denies that Ultius is part of the cheating industry, referring to it as a "doc prep service." In a written statement, the company says it works hard to ensure that its customers don't misuse its services, informing them of its fair-use policy (that its work is meant for reference only and must be properly cited) at least three times and requiring them to accept it. When the company suspects a problem, it conducts an investigation, drafts an internal report, and, if it finds a violation, disables the customer's account. However, the company says, it cannot individually monitor every one of its orders.

Ultius protects its business by keeping those orders private. When a student posts an assignment on Craigslist or other sites, looking for someone to pick it up, Google indexes that text, making it visible in searches. But the customer experience at Ultius occurs behind a wall, in the same way a bank keeps its clients' information private. Because Google can't create a record of those pages, professors wouldn't be able to find them.

The company's dealings with one Ph.D. candidate illustrate the increasingly complex work that students are outsourcing, while faculty members remain in the dark. Last year, Ultius contracted with a student who described herself as a "single active duty parent" to help write a concept paper for her doctoral program, records show. The job included revisions requested by the chair of her dissertation committee.

The Ph.D. student requested that Ultius complete a literature review and produce a theoretical framework for her dissertation. The order required the company to find data on migration patterns and economic growth in Jamaica, and to apply advanced economic theory. The company did the work, but the customer was so displeased with it that she filed a complaint with the Better Business Bureau. That complaint details the case.

Ultius considers customer service a top priority, and despite 19 complaints in the past three years, mainly minor beefs over papers and assignments, it maintains an A+ rating from the BBB.

The Ph.D. student threatened to go public with her story, but more often it's the paid cheaters who make threats. After Mr. Sambrano, the high-school guidance specialist, transferred $500 to have the whole course at Arizona State done for him, he stopped hearing from his Craigslist cheater and filed a PayPal claim against him. The cheater advised him to drop the claim or he'd hand over evidence of the arrangement to the university. Mr. Sambrano, afraid he'd be expelled, dropped the charge. He says

Tricia Bertram Gallant, a former president of the International Center for Academic Integrity, says professors are often surprised that someone else could be doing students' work. "When I tell them about contract cheating, they're shocked," she says.

BILL WECHTER FOR THE CHRONICLE

he ended up doing the class himself.

In another case, if not for a cheater turning a student in, a college may never have known that the student was paying someone else to log in to the course and complete the work. In May an undergraduate at Colorado State University-Global Campus, dissatisfied with the quality of the work done for him, filed a PayPal claim. Angered, the cheater gave the student's name to the instructor, along with text messages, screen shots of the student's portal, and payment records detailing how the student had arranged to have the entire course done for him, says Jon M. Bellum, the provost.

CSU-Global, an online institution with about 15,000 students, had its information-technology department look at the IP addresses used for the student's coursework and found more than one.

Mr. Bellum would not disclose the penalty the student faced, citing privacy law, but says such abuses can result in expulsion. Often, though, the university is not aware of the violation.

"Calculation based classes are $750. All others are $600. Anyone quoting different is not a pro and doesn't know what they are doing."

Colleges have tried technology to combat cheating. Several thousand institutions around the world use the anti-plagiarism software Turnitin, which says it has a database of some 600 million papers. But a recent study found that custom work is "virtually undetectable."

Coursera, an online education platform employed by dozens of prominent colleges, uses webcams and "keyboard dynamics," which attempt to verify students' identities on the basis of their typing patterns. But that doesn't do much good if the cheater is always typing.

CSU-Global says it spends about $60,000 a year administering random identity checks on its students. The tests require them to provide answers to personal questions like what banks service their loans or what streets they've lived on. If they don't answer accurately, they can't log in to their classes. About 2 percent of identity checks result in students' getting locked out of the CSU system.

Other institutions have blocked access to sites that help students cheat. Victor Valley College, in California, has prevented anyone on a campus computer from accessing the website of Student Network Resources. But students can turn to their own laptops or other devices.

The biggest key to fighting the problem is faculty engagement, says Tricia Bertram Gallant, a former president of the International Center for Academic Integrity. She often speaks with professors about the business, she says, and finds them surprised that someone else could be doing students' work.

"When I tell them about contract cheating, they're shocked," she says. "They basically say, 'What? That goes on?'"

Others are in denial that it could happen in their classes. And even those who know about it and want to stop it say they're too busy, or feel that the fight is futile, with new cheating companies popping up all the time.

But some professors are catching on. Last fall, Megan Elwood Madden, an associate professor in the School of Geology and Geophysics at the University of Oklahoma, spotted a suspicious passage in a student's paper. She ran it through Turnitin, finding several plagiarized sources but no match for the bulk of the text. So she Googled the student's research topic and found the assignment posted on Course Hero with the student's request for help.

A web search did not turn up the text the student had handed in, because it was hidden in Course Hero's system. But once Ms. Elwood Madden had logged in to the site, she could see communication between the student and a contractor suggesting that the student had had the work completed for him, the professor said in an email.

She discovered that the student had used Course Hero to arrange work in at least four other classes as well. The revelations led the university to expel the student.

Such stories are rare, academic-integrity officers say, because there are so few would-be enforcers in pursuit. After *The Chronicle* published an article about the Western Carolina experiment, two federal law-enforcement officials contacted the professors, eager to hear more about the business.

William Josephson, a former assistant attorney general in New York who has investigated fraud, says companies that assume false identities violate federal laws governing interstate commerce. Laws in at least 17 states prohibit students from using cheating services to complete their assignments. But prosecutors aren't enforcing them.

Faculty members on the front lines are no more active. That's also true in other countries where the cheating industry has developed. This spring, Marcus J. Ball, a higher-education reformer in Britain, came across an advertisement for academic cheating services on the wall of a London subway station.

The ad offended Mr. Ball, who began emailing college administrators and professors, trying to persuade them to sign a petition for the British government to debate the issue of contract cheating. His goal was to create a "unified block" of people willing to stand up to the cheating companies, with hopes of taking the fight to Canada, the United States, and elsewhere.

In May, Mr. Ball contacted more than 250 college officials, including academic-integrity leaders in several countries. Only five responded.

"Academics are constantly complaining about the essay-mill problem," he said in the email. But when presented with a "practical way forward to potentially solve the problem, they don't engage."

Last year, Ms. Bertram Gallant, who is director of the academic-integrity office at the University of California at San Diego, organized a dozen international experts to study the growth of contract cheating and how to stop it.

The group laid out a series of big goals. Chief among them: Mobilize faculty members and students to demand laws making it more difficult for cheating companies to operate. It is creating a tool kit to help professors detect and prevent cheating. And it is organizing an international awareness day to bring more attention to the problem.

But the group can only muster so much fight. "There's just not enough of us who care," says Ms. Bertram Gallant. "It's a very small cadre internationally who really dedicate our lives to working on this issue, and that's just not enough people."

College leaders haven't helped, she says. Many have failed to make the issue a priority. Few colleges have academic-integrity offices, she says, or devote dollars to the problem.

"There is a lot of money to support these companies, but not a lot of money to support our research," she says. "All the money is going to the illegal part of the industry, and none of it is going to combat the industry."

Colleges also might need to rethink their approach, says Ms. Bertram Gallant. As online education continues to grow, and cheating companies have more opportunities to infiltrate classes, institutions would do well to enlist people with the skills to ferret out violations, she says. While educators may be equipped to catch plagiarism, they don't have the tools to track a paid cheater who is assuming someone else's identity.

Instead, colleges continue to rely on proud traditions to fight the scourge of cheating. This fall, as students return to campus, some colleges will require them to sign an honor code. Others will spell out for them the potential consequences of academic dishonesty.

In October, academic-integrity officials at the University of Oklahoma plan to hold a session to warn new students about paper mills. The tool they're using to combat cheating? Tea bags. To remind the students of the importance of ethics, the university is encouraging them have a cup of "integri-tea."

Dan Bauman and Ben Myers contributed reporting to this article.

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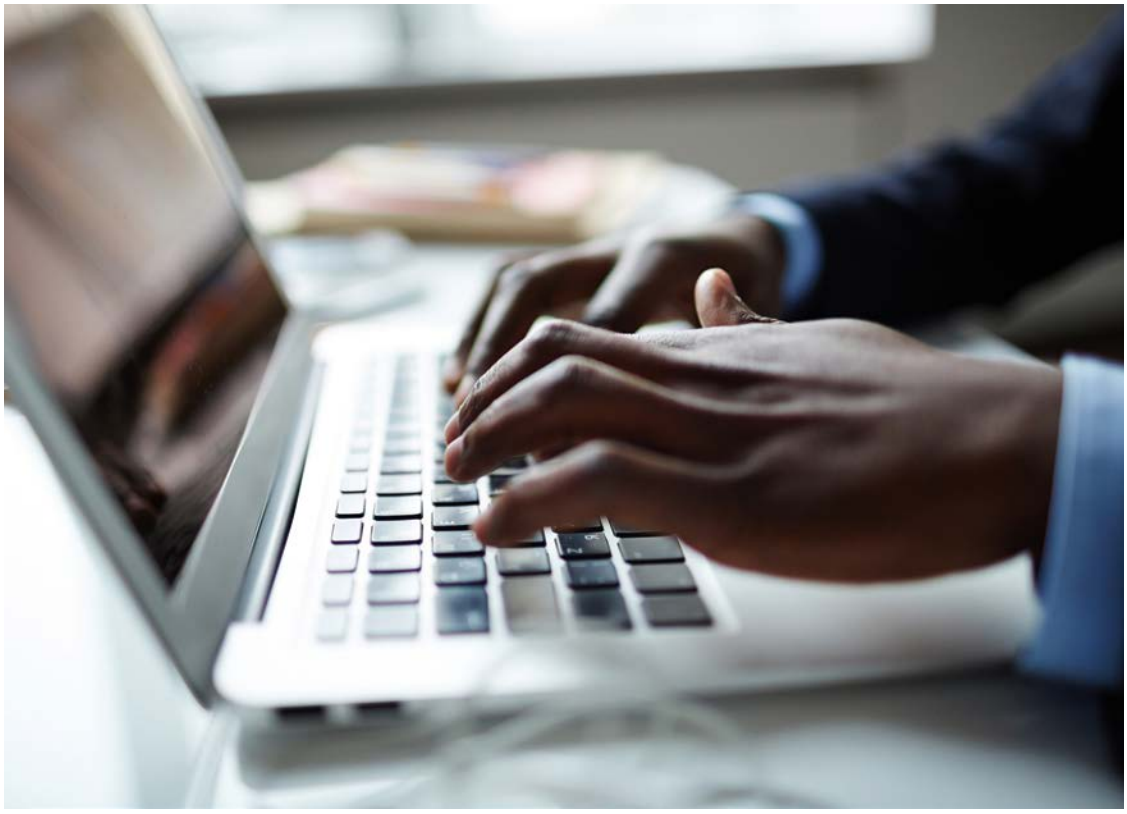

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Kenyan academic writers, who number more than 20,000, perform work for students in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere. "In every apartment building in Nairobi," says one, "you could find two, three writers."

Contract Cheating's African Labor

By XIAN BU

NAIROBI, KENYA

On the outskirts of Kenya's capital city, behind a shopping mall near a highway, stands a six-story apartment building where, in a unit on the top floor, Solomon and Eunice have just eaten breakfast. While their young daughter sits playing, the couple share a table in the living room, each on a laptop, performing academic work for hire.

Solomon, 32, and Eunice, 27, grew up in the countryside and attended universities here in Nairobi. Solomon, who studied physics, became an intern at the Kenya Bureau of Standards. But after eight months without pay, he says, living in the Mukuru slum, he gave up on a job at the agency. A friend invited him to train as an academic writer, to learn how to do research and write in accordance with American and European standards.

Two months later, in 2011, Solomon passed the tests in grammar and writing given by the company for which his friend worked, and began writing papers for students in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere. Eunice, a bank clerk earning less

than $500 a month, soon saw the opportunity. Others have, too. "In every apartment building in Nairobi," says Solomon, "you could find two, three writers."

As the field gains popularity among Kenyan college graduates, competition is fierce. The network of academic writers here is a hierarchy governed by the companies that control the work, as well as local rules.

After passing the tests, beginner-level writers usually complete several papers free to demonstrate their skills. They then start to earn $2 to $5 a page. Those with premium accounts on essay-writing websites can fetch $7 to $11 a page. In a local twist, they often subcontract to trainees, paying them a fraction of the wages and editing their work.

A representative at the company for which Solomon now writes confirmed that it produces academic papers for college and graduate students and said it was based in New York. Solomon doubts that, but if clients ask, he is supposed to tell them that he is American or British. A web administrator has warned him: Do not reveal that you are African.

Solomon, who declined to give his last name because of the sensitivity of his work, has risen in the ranks. Orders come through the companies' websites, and sometimes a dozen writers will vie for one. Whoever acts fastest gets it. So Solomon uses fiber-optic internet access and a laptop with only three applications installed — Google Chrome, Microsoft Word, and a PDF reader — with no antivirus software, which can slow the machine down. "Even if it takes a microsecond," he says, "that is too much for me."

Grabbing as many assignments as he can on his premium account, Solomon distributes them among four trainees, all college graduates. He checks their papers word by word, he says, making revisions, citing sources, and correcting references. He doesn't want any mistakes to threaten his livelihood.

On a private Facebook group — not even its name is public — Kenyan academic writers exchange information. They number more than 20,000. Some, looking for a shortcut or a quick payout, arrange to buy and sell accounts on the companies' websites. An intermediate one might go for $1,000 to $3,000, Solomon says — he has sold a few. He would consider an offer of $10,000, he says, for his premium account, one level from the top.

Kenya's per capita gross national income is about $1,300 a year. With Eunice also having become a premium writer, the couple can make about $5,000 a month in slow seasons, Solomon says. In peak seasons, that income doubles. Their monthly record is $14,000. The company makes direct deposits to his bank account every two weeks, he says.

Although the pay is good, the work is not easy. Sometimes Solomon completes assignments for Ph.D. students. Business and medicine he likes better than history. He won't touch computer programming, which he says he knows nothing about. To communicate with clients, he often wakes up in the middle of the night. In the United States, for example, the Eastern time zone is seven or eight hours behind Nairobi. "If the customer sends you a message, and you're asleep, you reply after eight hours, the customer will get mad," he says.

In writing papers, or editing trainees' work, Solomon and Eunice must absorb a lot of information and guard against plagiarism. "For you to get paid, the customer has to pass, to get a good grade. So you have to be really, really smart," he says. "It's very stressful." An incorrect reference or a missed deadline can mean not only docked pay, but a fine.

The couple generally log 10-hour days, researching and writing and pausing to look after their daughter. When dinnertime comes, Eunice takes a break and cooks. On some Saturdays they work, but Sundays are always family time. They live modestly, sending money home and investing in new businesses, like used-car sales.

Solomon describes his work as "capitalism": The companies take a cut before paying the writers, and the writers take a cut before paying the trainees.

And he doesn't seem to blame his clients for cheating on their assignments. "They don't do it because they're lazy," he says, "but because of the circumstances." Some are busy with other assignments they believe are more important, he says. Some have language barriers or difficulty typing. Others struggle with personal issues. He recalls a mother whose work he did while her baby was in the hospital.

In a country with high unemployment, he will take on that work, he says. "You have to do whatever to survive."

Xian Bu has reported, in English and Chinese, from the United States, China, and Africa.

Originally published on August 28, 2016

In a Fake Online Class With Students Paid to Cheat, Could Professors Catch the Culprits?

By BRAD WOLVERTON

Alvin Malesky, an associate professor and head of the psychology department at Western Carolina U.: Online-cheating services can "do medicine or chemistry or English — it runs the gamut. All sides of the academic house are threatened by this."

WESTERN CAROLINA U.

Alvin Malesky has taught online classes for at least seven years and, as a former law-enforcement officer and forensic psychologist, is trained to detect deception.

Last year he and a colleague at Western Carolina University, concerned about the growing threat of online cheating and the legitimacy of companies that purport to do students' work, set up an experiment to test the market. With the help of a research grant, they created a fake online course and paid several students to cheat, including one who hired a company to take the entire class for him. The professors concealed from themselves the identities of the students, then tried to catch the cheaters.

Their goal was to see how easily students could find a company that would assume their identity — participating in weekly discussion boards, writing papers, and taking exams — while passing off all of the work as their own. Such a study, the professors figured, could help them assess the reliability of online-cheating companies and determine how serious a challenge they pose to online education.

Mr. Malesky and a colleague, Robert Crow, an assistant professor of educational research, created a phony 10-week introductory-psychology course, enrolling 12 undergraduates and three graduate students who had already taken such a class. The students enrolled to gain research experience, to earn honors credit, or to be part of an independent research project. (The research was approved by Western Carolina's institutional review board as well as its chief counsel, registrar, and campus police.)

Working with the registrar's office, the professors assigned the students fake names, student-identification numbers, and email addresses. Even the professor listed on the syllabus was made up. (A third instructor acted as a liaison between the students and the other faculty members.)

Before the course started, the professors dangled an incentive: If they failed to identify any of the students who had cheated, those students would be eligible for a $350 raffle. Could the instructors outsmart the impostor?

THOUSANDS OF ONLINE CHEATERS

Mr. Malesky, an associate professor and head of the psychology department at Western Carolina, which is near Asheville, N.C., was an early skeptic of online classes, viewing them as a watered-down version of education. But as he has taught more online courses — at least two every summer in recent years — he has come to see their value. Yet he wondered how easily they could be exploited.

Several years ago, after reading about the growth of essay mills and services that advertise taking online courses for a fee, he started asking his students about their experience with cheating. He says he was surprised at how prevalent they said cheating was, and how quickly the online-cheating market had grown.

"I got concerned," he says. "Are these services legitimate, or is it just a way to scam students?"

'I got concerned. Are these services legitimate, or is it just a way to scam students?' According to his and Mr. Crow's research, which is to be published next year in the journal *College Teaching*, some seven million students, or almost a third of all those attending college, were enrolled in at least one online course last year. If even a small percentage of those students cheated, the professors wrote in their paper — "Academic Dishonesty: Assessing the Threat of Cheating Companies to Online Education" — that translates into tens of thousands of online cheaters each year.

For their experiment, the researchers tapped John Baley, then a graduate student in clinical psychology, to contact various companies and determine which one could best help him cheat. He started by typing a few phrases into a search engine: "online class help"; "take my class for me"; "cheat in my online class."

Some 20 websites consistently came up, and he selected eight that appeared viable, contacting each by email. He eliminated sites for a number of reasons. Several, for example, offered to complete only single assignments, not entire courses. One site requested nearly $3,000, which he believed was too expensive for a typical college student.

Mr. Baley discovered that at least two sites shared a domain in India. The email responses from those businesses were so "elementary," Mr. Baley wrote in an account of his experience included in the paper, that "I was concerned that they could not adequately complete our course and earn an A."

POSING AS 'JOEY SANCHEZ'

The company he went with, which the researchers do not identify in their paper, had a professional website and a staff that responded promptly to his requests.

Posing as "Joey Sanchez," Mr. Baley told the cheating company that he had taken on too much that semester and needed someone to complete an entire online class for him.

Someone from the site emailed back quickly: "Sure, what course options do you have? I would recommend one of the following: math, stats, accounting, etc ... but we can help with anything. so just let me know."

"Joey" emailed that he needed someone to take a 10-week accelerated course in introductory psychology, and inquired if the company was prepared to handle all aspects of the class. The company would not only take the whole course for

Joey, its representative said, but promised to earn him an A.

'I was kind of blown away. I think it would've worked flawlessly for pretty much anyone capable of reading.' After asking Joey for his contact information, which he submitted on the company's website, and a copy of the course syllabus, the company sent him an invoice for $917. Joey asked to make the payments in two installments. He made the first using a prepaid credit card. Halfway through the course, he paid the second installment in the same way.

After receiving the first payment, the company took the first weekly quiz, earning a nearly perfect score. Soon afterward, it requested Joey's help in purchasing a required textbook (he provided electronic access). From that point on, the company completed all of Joey's work without any input, including quizzes, examinations, and discussion-board posts, receiving an A on every assignment. Throughout the course, while Mr. Baley knew who Joey Sanchez was, Mr. Malesky and Mr. Crow did not.

Instructors "may be ignorant to the fact that it is possible for an entire course to be completed covertly by a paid impostor."

The one assignment that posed a problem was a live video presentation, which the company refused to do. Instead, the company agreed to send Joey a set of slides and a script that he could read from — but he would have to present the material himself. (Mr. Baley enlisted a fellow graduate student so he wouldn't blow his cover.)

The materials didn't show up until hours before the presentation, so Mr. Baley's colleague couldn't review them beforehand. But neither Mr. Malesky nor Mr. Crow identified the presentation as fraudulent.

"I was kind of blown away," Mr. Baley said in an interview. "I think it would've worked flawlessly for pretty much anyone capable of reading."

HAPPENING 'UNDER OUR NOSES'

Throughout the course, the professors used Turnitin and Googled students' work to check for plagiarism. They also monitored the time that students spent completing their tests to see if groups of students were taking exams at the same time.

In the end, the professors caught several students plagiarizing material. But they did not detect that Joey Sanchez was a fraud. Both instructors gave him an A in the class.

"I certainly did not feel that 'Joey' was being 'run' by a cheating company," Mr. Malesky wrote in the paper. "If anything, Joey struck me as a conscientious and motivated student who wanted to get as much out of the course as possible."

Mr. Crow wrote that, although the quality of Joey's work appeared to be at a level "suspiciously higher" than that of an average freshman, the professor did not "red-flag" him for academic dishonesty.

"Instructors such as myself," Mr. Crow wrote, "may be ignorant to the fact that it is possible for an entire course to be completed covertly by a paid impostor."

The professors found the whole process unsettling, suggesting in their paper that, as demand continues to grow for online education, the number and quality of companies that supply cheating services are likely to expand — along with the number of students obtaining false grades, degrees, and credentials.

Instructors 'may be ignorant to the fact that it is possible for an entire course to be completed covertly by a paid impostor.' "If left unaddressed, this expansion has the potential to erode the value and credibility of the online component of higher education," they wrote.

Their paper mentions a handful of effective ways to detect cheating in virtual classes, including keystroke recognition and retinal scans. But the kind of cheating that happened in their study is hard to catch.

In an interview, Mr. Malesky said he was most surprised at how efficient and versatile the company was, which suggested to him that any discipline was vulnerable.

"They could do medicine or chemistry or English — it runs the gamut," he said. "All sides of the academic house are threatened by this."

If he could sound one note of caution to administrators, he said, it would be that awareness is key.

"This is legitimate, and it's happening very effectively under our noses," he said. "As of now, there are no mechanisms in place to stop it."

Originally published on December 22, 2015

3 Modern Methods of Cheating

This Is How Students Cheat in MOOCs

Researchers at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have identified a way students are cheating to earn credit in MOOCs. The method is the subject of a working paper, "Detecting and Preventing 'Multiple-Account' Cheating in Massive Open Online Courses," published online on Monday.

According to the researchers, some students are creating at least two accounts in a MOOC — one or more with which to purposely fail assignments in order to discover the correct answers, which they use to ace the assignments in their primary account. The researchers analyzed data from nearly two million course participants in 115 MOOCs offered by MITx and Harvardx, and found that more than 1 percent of the certificates earned appeared to result from this kind of cheating. And among those students who have earned 20 or more certificates, 25 percent had used this strategy to cheat.

To combat the cheating, the researchers recommend that solutions not be given out until an assignment is past due and that questions be randomized so they're not identical among all students.

— ANDY THOMASON

Originally published on August 25, 2015

Universities Ban Smart Watches During Finals

Some Australian universities warned students this month not to wear wristwatches during final exams, amid concerns that increasingly popular wearable technology, like the Apple Watch, could foster cheating.

La Trobe University, in Melbourne, and the University of New South Wales, in Sydney, both issued warnings at the start of their final-exam periods that students would have to remove their watches before testing began. The University of New South Wales required students to put all wristwatches in clear bags under their desks. La Trobe students could place traditional watches on their desks while taking exams, but they could not have smart watches in an exam room.

Such policies are likely to be in place soon at American universities, said Eric Klopfer, director of the Scheller Teacher Education Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

It is becoming increasingly more difficult to distinguish a smart watch from a traditional watch, he said, so if colleges don't want students to wear smart watches during exams, they'll probably have to ban all watches.

There has also been a push to create tests that would be immune to students' efforts to store answers on their phones or watches, Mr. Klopfer said. He compared the approach to open-book exams, which focus less on memorization and more on analysis.

"As we get better at our educational system, it will seem less like we need to ban these things," he said, "because the kinds of things we'll be putting on an exam students won't be able to store on a watch."

The Australian universities aren't the first to ban smart watches from exam rooms, though. The Educational Testing Service, which administers the Graduate Record Examination and the Test of English as a Foreign Language, started using wands years ago to ensure that test takers didn't carry cellphones into exams, said Ray Nicosia, executive director for ETS's Office of Testing Integrity.

Proctors can use the same wands — similar to those seen at airport security lines — to check whether test takers are wearing watches. So now the proctors can ask to inspect the watches and store them in a locker, if necessary. The company wants to "stay ahead of anyone taking an unfair advantage," Mr. Nicosia said.

"The test takers comply," he said. "They want to get in, take their test, and move on."

— MARY ELLEN MCINTIRE

Originally published on June 18, 2015

Another Use for Yik Yak on Campus? Cheating on Exams

With new technologies come new ways to cheat. Yik Yak, the anonymous, location-based app that has been a hotbed of cyberbullying on college campuses, is also the newest tool for students seeking to cheat on exams.

J. Scott Christianson, an assistant teaching professor in the department of management at the University of Missouri at Columbia, has been monitoring Yik Yak recently to see what students are talking about.

When he was on the app, he saw several yaks about an exam. It looked as if a student had just gotten out of the test and was using Yik Yak to share what he or she could remember about the questions, seemingly an attempt to provide a cheat sheet for students who would be taking it later.

In November the student newspaper at the State University of New York at Stony Brook reported that students there had used Yik Yak to share answers on quizzes and tests, especially in large lecture classes.

Given the app's anonymity, it's likely that Yik Yak seems a safe way to spread the word. There have been cases in which students who have threatened violence have been identified and arrested, but, to campus officials, the users are all but untraceable.

Students have found many ways to violate academic integrity over the years — this one is just more high-tech. Tracy Mitrano, director of Internet culture, policy, and law at Cornell University, says she thinks using Yik Yak in this way is not unlike seeking help from websites like Course Hero or from fraternities and sororities that are rumored to keep filing cabinets of old tests.

But Yik Yak could allow such cheating to be done on a much broader scale that's also more difficult to police, says Jeremy Littau, an assistant professor of journalism and communications at Lehigh University who has done research on the app. With smaller networks of students, like teammates, club members, or fraternity brothers, the answers have to travel person to person. But with Yik Yak, they can reach many students at once. "That they can just broadcast this out in the open makes it a little more dangerous," he says.

Professors could use some methods to try to prevent students from sharing information about their exams — not recycling questions, making multiple versions of tests, not passing tests back, and instead requiring that students who wish to view them do so in the faculty member's office, Mr. Littau says.

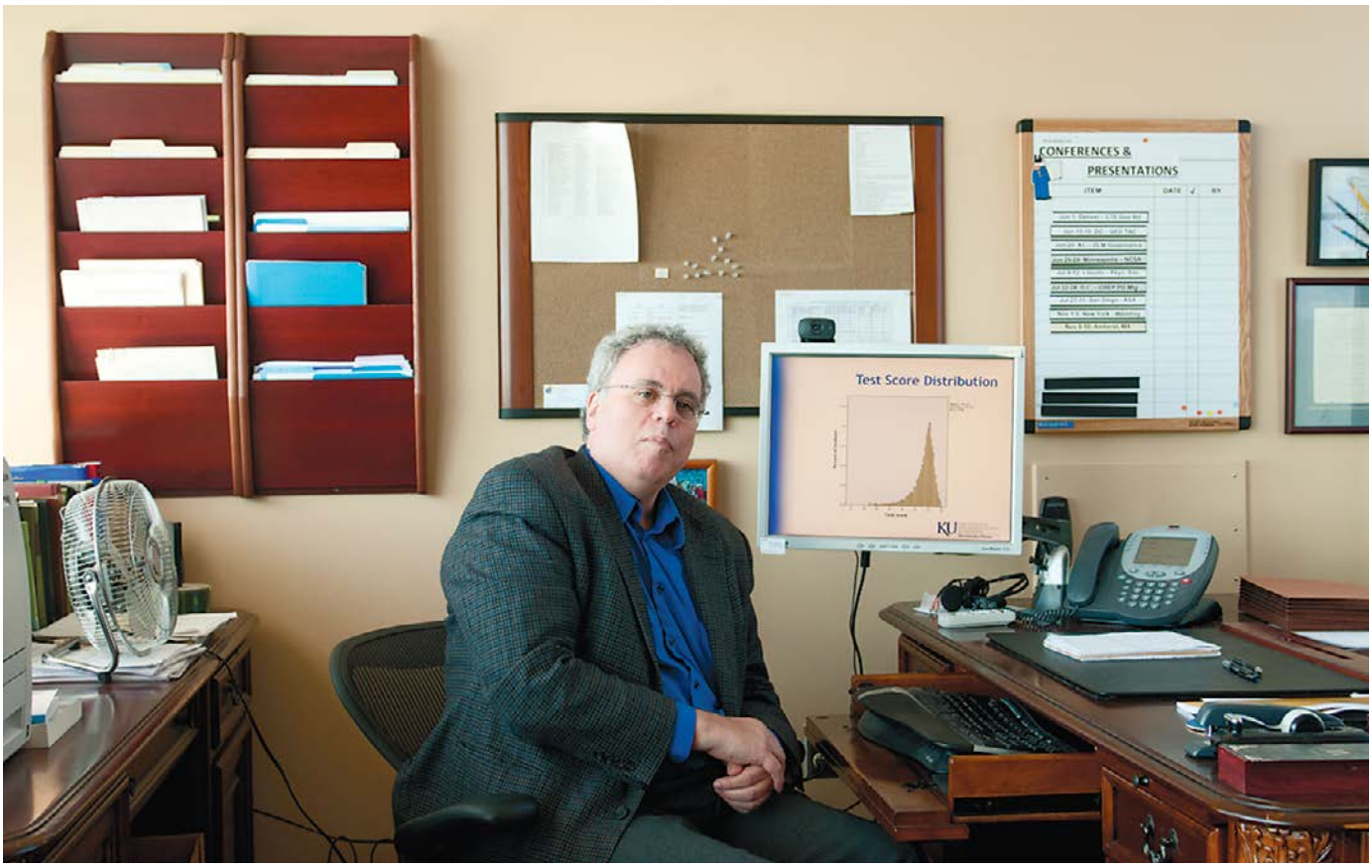
Professors could also try to interfere with the process. Mr. Christianson says a professor or teaching assistant could "poison the well" by submitting posts on Yik Yak that mislead or misdirect students. But it seems unlikely that faculty members would take the time to do that, he says. Unlike students, professors have better things to do than troll Yik Yak.

— CASEY FABRIS

Originally published on May 6, 2015

Online Classes See Cheating Go High-Tech

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG



WILLIAM LOUNSBURY FOR THE CHRONICLE

"It's important that the research community improve perhaps as quickly as the cheating community is improving," says Neal Kingston, of the U. of Kansas, who organized a Conference on Statistical Detection of Potential Test Fraud.

Easy A's may be even easier to score these days, with the growing popularity of online courses. Tech-savvy students are finding ways to cheat that let them ace online courses with minimal effort, in ways that are difficult to detect.

Take Bob Smith, a student at a public university in the United States. This past semester, he spent just 25 to 30 minutes each week on an online science course, the time it took him to take the weekly test. He never read the online materials for the course and never cracked open a textbook. He learned almost nothing. He got an A.

His secret was to cheat, and he's proud of the method he came up with—though he asked that his real name and college not be used, because he doesn't want to get caught. It involved four friends and a shared Google Doc, an online word-processing file that all five of them could read and add to at the same time during the test.

More on his method in a minute. You've probably already heard of plenty of clever ways students

cheat, and this might simply add one more to the list. But the issue of online cheating may rise in prominence, as more and more institutions embrace online courses, and as reformers try new systems of educational badges, certifying skills and abilities learned online. The promise of such systems is that education can be delivered cheaply and conveniently online. Yet as access improves, so will the number of people gaming the system, unless courses are designed carefully.

This prediction has not escaped many of those leading new online efforts, or researchers who specialize in testing. As students find new ways to cheat, course designers are anticipating them and devising new ways to catch folks like Mr. Smith.

In the case of that student, the professor in the course had tried to prevent cheating by using a testing system that pulled questions at random from a bank of possibilities. The online tests could be taken anywhere and were open-book, but students had only a short window each week in which to take them, which was not long enough for most people to look up the answers on the fly. As the students proceeded, they were told whether each answer was right or wrong.

Mr. Smith figured out that the actual number of possible questions in the test bank was pretty small. If he and his friends got together to take the test jointly, they could paste the questions they saw into the shared Google Doc, along with the right or wrong answers. The schemers would go through the test quickly, one at a time, logging their work as they went. The first student often did poorly, since he had never seen the material before, though he would search an online version of the textbook on Google Books for relevant keywords to make informed guesses. The next student did significantly better, thanks to the cheat sheet, and subsequent test-takers upped their scores even further. They took turns going first. Students in the course were allowed to take each test twice, with the two results averaged into a final score.

"So the grades are bouncing back and forth, but we're all guaranteed an A in the end," Mr. Smith told me. "We're playing the system, and we're playing the system pretty well."

He is a first-generation college student who says he works hard, and honestly, in the rest of his courses, which are held in-person rather than online. But he is juggling a job and classes, and he wanted to find a way to add an easy A to his transcript each semester.

Although the syllabus clearly forbids academic dishonesty, Mr. Smith argues that the university has put so little into the security of the course that it can't be very serious about whether the online students are learning anything. Hundreds of students took the course with him, and he never communicated with the professor directly. It all felt sterile, impersonal, he told me. "If they didn't think students would do this, then they didn't think it through."

A professor familiar with the course, who also asked not to be named, said that it is not unique in this regard, and that other students probably cheat in online introductory courses as well. To them, the courses are just hoops to jump through to get a credential, and the students are happy to pay the tuition, learn little, and add an A.

"This is the gamification of education, and students are winning," the professor told me.

Of course, plenty of students cheat in introductory courses taught the old-fashioned way as well. John Sener, a consultant who has long worked in online learning, says the incident involving Mr. Smith sounds similar to students' sharing of old tests or bringing in cheat sheets. "There is no shortage of weak assessments," he says.

He cautions against dismissing online courses based on inevitable examples of poor class design: "If there are weaknesses in the system, students will find them and try to game it."

In some cases, the answer is simply designing tests that aren't multiple-choice. But even when professors assign papers, students can use the Internet to order custom-written assignments. Take the example of the Shadow Scholar, who described in a *Chronicle* article how he made more than $60,000 a year writing term papers for students around the country.

Part of the answer may be fighting technology with more technology, designing new ways to catch cheaters.

COUNTERING THE CHEATERS

When John Fontaine first heard about the Shadow Scholar, who was helping students cheat on assignments, he grew angry. Mr. Fontaine works for Blackboard, and his job is to think up new services and products for the education-software company. His official title is senior director of technology evangelism.

"I was offended," he says. "I thought, I'm going to get that guy." So he started a research project to do just that.

Blackboard's learning-management software features a service that checks papers for signs of plagiarism, and thousands of professors around the country use it to scan papers when they are turned in.

Mr. Fontaine began to wonder whether authors write in unique ways that amount to a kind of fingerprint. If so, he might be able to spot which papers were written by the Shadow Scholar or other writers-for-hire, even if they didn't plagiarize other work directly.

"People tend to use the same words over and over again, and people have the same vocabulary," he says. "I've been working on classifiers that take

documents and score them and build what I call a document fingerprint." The system could establish a document fingerprint for each student when they turn in their first assignments, and notice if future papers differ in style in suspicious ways.

Mr. Fontaine's work is simply research at this point, he emphasizes, and he has not used any actual student papers submitted to the company's system. He would have to get permission from professors and students before doing that kind of live test.

In fact, he's not sure whether the idea will ever work well enough to add it as a Blackboard feature.

Mr. Fontaine is not the only one doing such research. Scholars at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology say they are looking for new ways to verify the identity of students online as well.

Anant Agarwal is head of MIT's Open Learning Enterprise, which coordinates the university's MITx project to offer free courses online and give students a chance to earn certificates. It's a leading force in the movement to offer free courses online.

One challenge leaders face is verifying that online students are who they say they are.

A method under consideration at MIT would analyze each user's typing style to help verify identity, Mr. Agarwal told me in a recent interview. Such electronic fingerprinting could be combined with face-recognition software to ensure accuracy, he says. Since most laptops now have Webcams built in, future online students might have to smile for the camera to sign on.

Some colleges already require identity-verification techniques that seem out of a movie. They're using products such as the Securexam Remote Proctor, which scans fingerprints and captures a 360-degree view around students, and Kryterion's Webassessor, which lets human proctors watch students remotely on Web cameras and listen to their keystrokes.

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Researchers who study testing are also working on the problem of cheating. Last month more than 100 such researchers met at the University of Kansas at the Conference on Statistical Detection of Potential Test Fraud.

One message from the event's organizers was that groups that offer standardized tests, companies developing anticheating software, and researchers need to join forces and share their work. "Historically this kind of research has been a bit of a black box," says Neal Kingston, an associate professor of education at the university and director of its Center for Educational Testing Evaluation. "It's important that the research community improve perhaps as quickly as the cheating community is improving."

There seems to be growing interest in such sharing, says James Wollack, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. "If you go on the Web and look, it's pretty clear that the people trying to game the system are learning from each other," he says. "Unless the testing industry also pools its resources, we're always going to be playing this game of catch-up."

A revolution in education thanks to online courses could be in store, as Thomas L. Friedman recently predicted. But significant challenges remain, not least among them preventing Mr. Smith from fraudulently claiming an education that he didn't get.

Originally published on June 3, 2012

OPINION

Memorization, Cheating, and Technology

By SCOTT P. HIPPENSTEEL

What can we do to stem the increased use of phones and laptops to cheat on exams in class?

I suspect that I am in the same position as many others who teach at a university undergoing rapid enrollment increases. Most of my upper-level undergraduate courses have doubled in size since I began teaching more than a decade ago.

Over the same time frame, I've noticed a growing resistance in my classroom to memorization. When I tell students enrolled in my paleontology course that they will need to know the geologic time scale, for example, I am frequently asked, "Why?" They know the information is a quick Google search away. What's the point of memorizing it, they want to know.

My answer is always the same tired refrain: "If I tell you something happened during the Devonian, and you can't instantly place this in geochronological context, you'll never be able to understand the story of life on the planet."

There are some things you simply have to know, off the top of your head, to be successful in a college course.

Resistance to memorization, combined with increasing class size, has led to a third disturbing trend: an increase in cases of academic dishonesty. That combination of problems is only exacerbated by the use of cell phones, iPads, and laptops in the classroom. Studies of academic dishonesty (such as plagiarism or copying on exams) and the prevalence of cheating in the traditional classroom are abundant. Comparisons between cheating in online courses and in traditional classrooms are also abundant.

But there is a dearth of research on the region between those two — namely, on the use of online technology to cheat while in the classroom.

Examples abound of students employing creative nontechnological means to resist memorization in favor of cheating. In my classroom, I have found plastic erasers with the names and contributions of early geologists written in microscopic script under the cardboard sleeve. Pepsi and Coke bottles are also popular places for lists on the inside of the label. (You can't see the list unless the bottle is slightly emptied and tipped.)

Such activities were, and remain, fairly unusual in my classroom. (I think.) But examples of cheating using technology are clearly on the rise. Amazingly, when confronted, students often genuinely do not believe they are doing anything wrong. Why, from a student's perspective, should they have to memorize basic stratigraphic principles when their phone can produce a list of them in a matter of seconds?

Through plenty of trial and error, I've found that the most

important classroom management tool you can use in this regard: Ban the use of calculators found on phones or laptops for any graded test.

On many exams I give a few problems that involve complex equations. For the past five semesters I've allowed the use of the calculator function on phones to answer such questions and the result has been repeated and frequent Googling of answers for the nonmathematical questions. That behavior continues despite my many warnings that it is cheating.

Even if instructed to bring a calculator to an exam — not a phone with a calculator, but an actual calculator — only about one in five students will. The rest pull out their phones and quietly ignore my prohibition. I'm embarrassed to say that in the past I ignored such transgressions, alleviating my discomfort with a promise to monitor these students carefully. Given the choice between students not having a calculator (phone prohibition enforced, incorrect answer) or allowing them use of the phone (with monitoring) I usually chose the latter, more lenient approach — as I wrote in a 2013 column for The Chronicle. I rationalized that the point of the question was to see if they could answer it with a calculator, not to measure if they had remembered to bring a calculator to the exam. However, that approach was feasible with 20 students; today I have 60 or more.

Resistance to memorization, combined with increasing class size, has led to a third disturbing trend: an increase in cases of academic dishonesty.

The cheating goes beyond the simple use of search engines. Students will text answers back and forth across the classroom or upload their class notes and handouts via email or photographs. I've even had a student attempt to photograph the exam questions, presumably to pass them on to a friend who has the same class later in the week.

Most of those examples would clearly be understood as cheating to the perpetrators. But for most students, a simple Google search during a test does not register as such, especially if the answer would have required basic memorization.

More than once during the first exam of the semester I've been directly asked, "Can I use my phone?" Last semester the answer was clear: No, there isn't any math on this exam so you don't need a calculator. The confused follow up was "No, I meant to look stuff up." Or in contrast, "Can I use my phone?" No. "How about just the calculator?" What was the original question asking permission for, exactly?

Solutions, to me at least, now seem obvious. Any appearance of a phone, laptop, or tablet during any class period in which the students are being evaluated is prohibited in my courses. I state this rule on the syllabus and announce it during the first several class meetings. (Students who might need access to their phones for emergency or personal reasons have to ask permission before class and then sit in the front row.)

The policy has had positive consequences aside from eliminating the temptation for students to cheat.

After one semester in which a large-enrollment class was repeatedly interrupted by ringing cellphones I thought I'd try a new tactic. A new colleague, fresh from graduate school and looking all of 21 years old, asked if he could sit in on my 180-seat physical geology course for the first few weeks. I agreed, on one condition: I asked him to hold my cellphone for me during the class (a disposable phone with only a handful of prepaid minutes remaining).

On the first day of class, while I was discussing course mechanics and decorum, I had our departmental administrator call the phone. My colleague, who the students assumed was a fellow student, was mortified. He became even more flustered when I quickly crossed the room, picked up the phone, and threw it as hard as I could against a cinder-block wall, shattering it into a dozen pieces. The reaction of the class was universal — dropped jaws followed by subtle searching through their pockets and backpacks to turn off their own phones.

Not a single phone rang during class that semester.

Scott P. Hippensteel is an associate professor of earth sciences at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

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TAMIKA MOORE FOR THE CHRONICLE

In Hoover, Ala., ProctorU employees monitor students taking tests online. The American Council on Education has recommended that colleges provide credit for several MOOCs proctored by the company.

Behind the Webcam's Watchful Eye, Online Proctoring Takes Hold

By STEVE KOLOWICH

Hailey Schnorr has spent years peering into the bedrooms, kitchens, and dorm rooms of students via Webcam. In her job proctoring online tests for universities, she has learned to focus mainly on students' eyes.

"What we look for is eye movement," says Ms. Schnorr. "When the eyes start veering off to the side, that's clearly a red flag."

Ms. Schnorr works for ProctorU, a company hired by universities to police the integrity of their online courses.

ProctorU is part of a cottage industry of online proctoring providers that has grown in recent years as colleges and universities have set their sights on "nontraditional" students who want to earn degrees without leaving home.

The old biases against online education have begun to erode, but companies that offer remote-proctoring services still face an uphill battle in persuading skeptics, many of whom believe that the duty of preserving academic integrity should not be entrusted to online watchers who are often thousands of miles from the test-takers. So ProctorU and other players have installed a battery of protocols aimed at making their systems as airtight as possible.

The result is a monitoring regime that can seem a bit Orwellian. Rather than

one proctor sitting at the head of a physical classroom and roaming the aisles every once in a while, remote proctors peer into a student's home, seize control of her computer, and stare at her face for the duration of a test, reading her body language for signs of impropriety.

Even slight oddities of behavior often lead to "incident reports," which the companies supply to colleges along with recordings of the suspicious behavior.

Rebekah Lovaas, 24, served as a proctor at Kryterion, another such company, for three years before being promoted to operations analyst. When she first started, Ms. Lovaas said, the company's methods struck her as "almost intrusive."

She was not alone. Teresa Fishman, director of the International Center for Academic Integrity, a leading advocate for reliable safeguards against cheating and a former police officer, said she favored the approach of asking online students to come to a physical testing center for exams. "To watch somebody in their room—that seems a little invasive to me," she said.

Each online-proctoring company has developed its own approach. Some monitor live feeds; others record students via Webcam and watch the recordings. Some require students to share a view of their computer monitor, and empower a proctor to override their cursor if necessary; others simply make students install software that makes it impossible to use Web browsers or chat programs while the exam is in progress.

The companies make bold claims about their effectiveness, arguing their services are not just equal to but *better* than in-person proctoring. "The level of supervision over the Web is much more intense," said William Dorman, chief executive at Kryterion. "Frankly," he said, "we can spot any cheating."

Kryterion notes "aberrant behavior"—a test-taker leaves his seat, or answers the phone, or some similar breach—in about 16 percent of the exams it monitors, said Mr. Dorman. This does not always mean the students are cheating, but it does mean the university will be notified.

Software Secure, another company that works with universities, classifies such "incidents" into three tiers. The company's subcontractor in India, Sameva Global, said it notes "minor suspicions" in 50 percent of exams; "intermediate" suspicions in 20 to 30 percent; and "major" incidents in 2 to 5 percent.

CREATING STANDARDS

The availability of these options raises a question for all universities: How much proctoring is enough?

Higher-education institutions are expected to certify academic achievement. But how they do that has been left largely unregulated.

Federal officials, when drafting the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, specifically avoided detailing proctoring requirements for online education, said Mollie McGill, a deputy director at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's Cooperative for Educational Technologies. When it came to policing online exams, the rule-making committee elected to avoid regulatory language that would favor any specific technology or practice, said Ms. McGill.

The result was a minimum standard for compliance—a secure login and password—that has left online programs largely to their own devices, she said.

The emergence of massive open online courses has brought new attention to ensuring integrity in a global online classroom. The American Council on Education, a Washington-based group that advises college presidents on policy, recently put ProctorU's protocols under the microscope as part of its review of five MOOCs from Coursera.

"In general our standard was that we wanted to see something that was at least as good or better than what you would see in a large lecture class," said Cathy A. Sandeen, vice president for education attainment and innovation at the council. That was the basic guidance the council gave the professors it enlisted to judge whether students who succeed in the Coursera MOOCs should be awarded transfer credit from degree-granting universities. All five courses earned a seal of approval, in what was a big moment for ProctorU and for online proctoring in general.

THE PROCTORING LIFE

At ProctorU's office in Livermore, Calif., Ms. Schnorr and her colleagues report to work wearing color-coded polo shirts: black for managers, blue for proctors, white for trainees. The proctors' workspaces are identical, she said, each with a computer and two monitors, and bear none of the family photos or other accouterments that adorn a typical lived-in cubicle; employees do not have regular workspaces, says Ms. Schnorr, they just take whatever workspace is open. The shifts typically last four hours, including a 10-minute break, although proctors sometimes work double shifts.

Watching people take tests can be dull work. Three proctors interviewed by *The Chronicle* said most incidents were routine, often the result of a misunderstanding. But occasionally a student will try to outwit the system—or simply throw proctors for a loop.

One student tried to fool ProctorU by attaching a sticky note just below his Webcam, so that the proctor couldn't see it. But the proctor caught the student's eyes drifting to the note and made him hold up a mirror to his monitor, busting him. Now

the mirror check is part of the company's regular protocols.

Michael Malicia, professional-services manager for Software Secure, said he had caught a student pretending to read questions aloud to herself when she was really dictating to a co-conspirator in the next room, who would then relay an answer. But no dice: In addition to watching the students, Software Secure, like other proctoring services, also listens in.

Other incidents are downright weird. Ms. Lovaas, the former Kryterion proctor, said one student appeared on screen wearing a chicken costume, and proceeded to take the test. The gesture was mystifying, but "we never detected any aberrant behavior," she said, until the student made a move to put on a chicken mask to match the outfit—a breach of Kryterion's policy against headgear that might be used to disguise a listening device. At that point, Ms. Lovaas said, "We were like, OK, this has gone too far."

Remote-proctoring services rely on the same technology that has made it possible for people to earn college degrees without having to report to a campus.

It's ironic, then, that most remote proctors are not allowed to work from home.

Why? Because they might slack off—or cheat.

The process requires "a lot of attention," said Nilofar Nigar, a marketing manager at Sameva Global, the company that oversees Software Secure's operations in India, where 80 percent of its proctors are located. Proctors who work from home are liable to get distracted, she said, "and we can't afford to have any fault in this process."

ProctorU and Kryterion also require their proctors to work from a central office.

One of Kryterion's goals is to turn the job of proctoring from an incidental or part-time gig for professors and other educators into a bona fide "career path," said Mr. Dorman, the chief executive.

Mr. Dorman said the 70 or so proctors at the company's headquarters in Phoenix, Ariz., run the gamut from young adults in their first jobs to more-experienced workers, often with customer-service or tech-support backgrounds.

The company requires 100 hours of training before its proctors can begin monitoring live tests. The proctors get paid hourly—between $15 and $25 per hour, depending on whether they are also qualified to troubleshoot technical difficulties—with opportunities for advancement within the company.

At the same time, Kryterion is sensitive to the possibility that a proctor might try to collude with a test-taker to cheat, or jot down the content of a particular exam with the intention of selling it to future students taking the same course.

And so, as they review video recordings of students taking exams, Kryterion's online proctors are sometimes under surveillance by their supervisors, who are, as Mr. Dorman put it, "proctoring the proctors."

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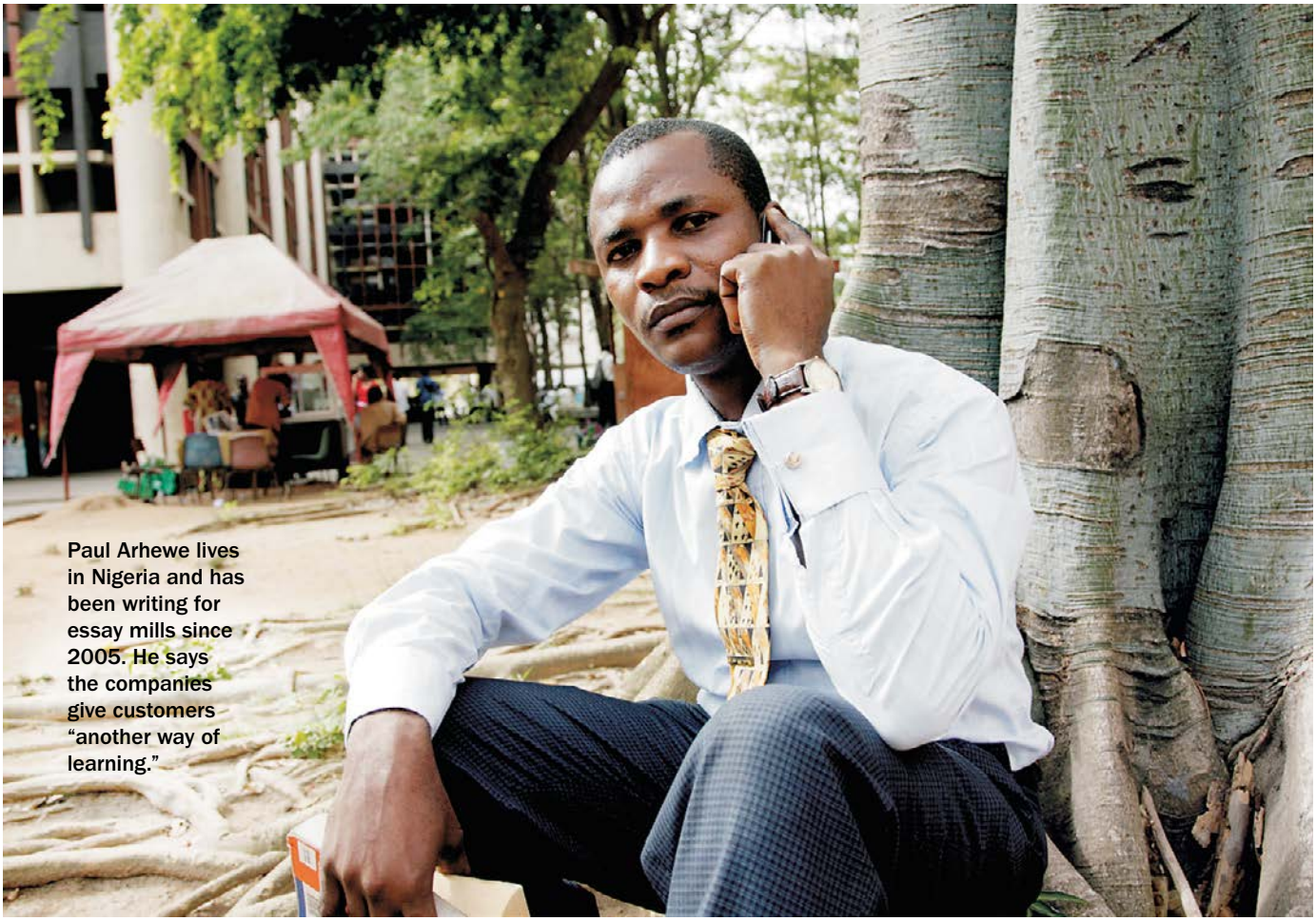

Paul Arhewe lives in Nigeria and has been writing for essay mills since 2005. He says the companies give customers "another way of learning."

PIUS UTOMI EKPEI FOR THE CHRONICLE

Cheating Goes Global as Essay Mills Multiply

By THOMAS BARTLETT

The orders keep piling up. A philosophy student needs a paper on Martin Heidegger. A nursing student needs a paper on dying with dignity. An engineering student needs a paper on electric cars.

Screen after screen, assignment after assignment—hundreds at a time, thousands each semester. The students come from all disciplines and all parts of the country. They go to community colleges and Ivy League universities. Some want a 10-page paper; others request an entire dissertation.

This is what an essay mill looks like from the inside. Over the past six months, with the help of current and former essay-mill writers, *The Chronicle* looked closely at one company, tracking its orders, examining its records, contacting its customers. The company, known as Essay Writers, sells so-called custom essays, meaning that its employees will write a paper to a student's specifications for a per-page fee. These papers, unlike those plucked from online databases, are invisible to plagiarism-detection software.

Everyone knows essay mills exist. What's surprising is how sophisticated and international they've become, not to mention profitable.

In a previous era, you might have found an essay mill near a college bookstore, staffed by former students. Now you'll find them online, and the actual writing is likely to be done by someone in Manila or Mumbai. Just as many American companies are outsourcing their administrative tasks, many American students are perfectly willing to outsource their academic work.

And if the exponential surge in the number of essay mills is any indication, the problem is only getting worse. But who, exactly, is running these companies? And what do the students who use their services have to say for themselves?

Go to Google and type "buy an essay." Among the top results will be Best Essays, whose slogan is "Providing Students with Original Papers since 1997." It's a professional-looking site with all the bells and whistles: live chat, flashy graphics, stock photos of satisfied students. Best Essays promises to deliver "quality custom written papers" by writers with either a master's degree or a Ph.D. Prices range from $19.99 to $42.99 per page, depending on deadline and difficulty.

To place an order, you describe your assignment, the number of pages, and how quickly you need it. Then you enter your credit-card number, and, a couple of days later, the paper shows up in your in box. All you have to do is add your name to the top and turn it in. Simple.

What's going on behind the scenes, however, is another story.

The address listed on the site is in Reston, Va. But it turns out that's the address of a company that allows clients to rent "virtual office space" — in other words, to claim they're somewhere they're not. A previous address used by Best Essays was a UPS store in an upscale strip mall. And while the phone number for Best Essays has a Virginia area code, that line is registered to a company that allows customers to forward calls anywhere in the world over the Internet.

The same contact information appears on multiple other essay-mill Web sites with names like Rush Essay, Superior Papers, and Best Term Paper. All of these sites are operated by Universal Research Inc., also known as Essay Writers. The "US/Canada Headquarters" for the company, according to yet another Web site, is in Herndon, Va. An Essay Writers representative told a reporter that the company's North American headquarters was a seven-story building with an attached garage and valet parking.

That was a lie. Drive to the address, and you will find a perfectly ordinary suburban home with a neatly trimmed front lawn and a two-car garage. The owner of the house is Victor Guevara and, ever since he bought it in 2004, he has received lots of strange mail. For instance, a calendar recently arrived titled "A Stroll Through Ukrainian Cities," featuring photographs of notable buildings in Odessa and Yalta. Not all of the missives, however, have been so benign. Once a police officer came to the door bearing a complaint from a man in India who hadn't been paid by Essay Writers. Mr. Guevara explained to the officer that he had no idea what the man was talking about.

So why, of all the addresses in the United States, was Mr. Guevara's chosen? He's not sure, but he has a theory. Before he bought the house, a woman named Olga Mizyuk lived there for a short time. The previous owner, a friend of Mr. Guevara's, let her stay rent free because she was down on her luck and she promised to teach him Russian. Mr. Guevara believes it's all somehow connected to Ms. Mizyuk.

That theory is not too far-fetched. The state of Virginia listed Olga Mizyuk as the agent of Universal Research LLC when it was formed in 2006, though that registration has since lapsed (it's now incorporated in Virginia with a different agent). The company was registered for a time in Nevada, but that is no longer valid either. The managing member of the Nevada company, according to state records, was Yuriy Mizyuk. Mr. Guevara remembers that Ms. Mizyuk spoke of a son named Yuriy. Could that all be a coincidence?

HIRING IN MANILA

Call any of the company's several phone numbers and you will always get an answer. Weekday or weekend, day or night. The person on the other end will probably be a woman named Crystal or Stephanie. She will speak stilted, heavily accented English, and she will reveal nothing about who owns the company or where it is located. She will be unfailingly polite and utterly unhelpful.

If pressed, Crystal or Stephanie will direct callers to a manager named Raymond. But Raymond is almost always either out of the office or otherwise engaged. When, after weeks of calls, The Chronicle finally reached Raymond, he hung up the phone before answering any questions.

But while the company's management may be publicity shy, sources familiar with its operations were able to shed some light. Essay Writers appears to have been originally based in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. While the company claims to have been in business since 1997, its Web sites have only been around since 2004. In 2007 it opened offices in the Philippines, where it operates under the name Uniwork.

The company's customer-service center is located on the 17th floor of the Burgundy Corporate Tower in the financial district of Makati City, part of the Manila metropolitan area. It is from there that operators take orders and answer questions from college students. The company also has a suite on the 16th floor, where its marketing and computer staff members promote and maintain

its Web sites. This involves making sure that when students search for custom essays, its sites are on the first page of Google results. (They're doing a good job, too. Recently two of the first three hits for "buy an essay" were Essay Writers sites.) One of its employees, who describes herself as a senior search-engine-optimization specialist at Uniwork, posted on her Twitter page that the company is looking for copy writers, Web developers, and link builders.

Some of the company's writers work in its Makati City offices. Essay Writers claims to have more than 200 writers, which may be true when freelancers are counted. A dozen or so, according to a former writer, work in the office, where they are reportedly paid between $1 and $3 a page — much less than its American writers, and a small fraction of the $20 or $30 per page customers shell out. The company is currently advertising for more writers, praising itself as "one of the most trusted professional writing companies in the industry."

It's difficult to know for sure who runs Essay Writers, but the name Yuriy Mizyuk comes up again and again. Mr. Mizyuk is listed as the contact name on the domain registration for essaywriters.net, the Web site where writers for the company log in to receive their assignments. A lawsuit was filed in January against Mr. Mizyuk and Universal Research by a debt-collection company. Repeated attempts to reach him — via phone and e-mail — were unsuccessful. Customer-service representatives profess not to have heard of Mr. Mizyuk.

Installed in its Makati City offices, according to a source close to the company, are overhead cameras trained on employees. These cameras reportedly send a video feed back to Kiev, allowing the Ukrainians to keep an eye on their workers in the Philippines. This same source says Mr. Mizyuk regularly visits the Philippines and describes him as a smallish man with thinning hair and dark-rimmed glasses. "He looks like Harry Potter," the source says. "The worst kind of Harry Potter."

WRITERS FOR HIRE

The writers for essay mills are anonymous and often poorly paid. Some of them crank out 10 or more essays a week, hundreds over the course of a year. They earn anywhere from a few dollars to $40 per page, depending on the company and the subject. Some of the freelancers have graduate degrees and can write smooth, A-level prose. Others have no college degree and limited English skills.

James Robbins is one of the good ones. Mr. Robbins, now 30, started working for essay mills to help pay his way through Lamar University, in Beaumont, Tex. He continued after graduation and, for a time, ran his own company under the name Mr. Essay. What he's discovered, after writing hundreds of academic papers, is that he has a knack for the form: He's fast, and his papers consistently earn high marks. "I can knock out 10 pages in an hour," he says. "Ten pages is nothing."

His most recent gig was for Essay Writers. His clients have included students from top colleges like the University of Pennsylvania, and he's written short freshman-comp papers along with longer, more sophisticated fare. Like all freelancers for Essay Writers, Mr. Robbins logs in to a password-protected Web site that gives him access to the company's orders. If he finds an assignment that's to his liking, he clicks the "Take Order" button. "I took one on Christological topics in the second and third centuries," he remembers. "I didn't even know what that meant. I had to look it up on Wikipedia."

Most essay mills claim that they're only providing "model" papers and that students don't really turn in what they buy. Mr. Robbins, who has a law degree and now attends nursing school, knows that's not true. In some cases, he says, customers have forgotten to put their names at the top of the papers he's written before turning them in. Although he takes pride in the writing he's done over the years, he doesn't have much respect for the students who use the service. "These are kids whose parents pay for college," he says. "I'll take their money. It's not like they're going to learn anything anyway."

That's pretty much how Charles Parmenter sees it. He wrote for Essay Writers and another company before quitting about a year ago. "If anybody wants to say this is unethical — yeah, OK, but I'm not losing any sleep over it," he says. Though he was, he notes, nervous that his wife would react badly when she found out what he was doing. As it happens, she didn't mind.

Mr. Parmenter, who is 54, has worked as a police officer and a lawyer over the course of a diverse career. He started writing essays because he needed the money and he knew he could do it well. He wrote papers for nursing and business students, along with a slew of English-literature essays. His main problem, he says, is that the quality of his papers was too high. "People would come back to me and say, 'It's a great paper, but my professor will never believe it's me,'" says Mr. Parmenter. "I had to dumb them down."

Eventually the low pay forced him to quit. In his best months, he brought home around $1,000. Other months it was half that. He estimates that he wrote several hundred essays, all of which he's kept, though most he can barely remember. "You write so many of these things they start running together," he says.

Both Mr. Parmenter and Mr. Robbins live in the United States. But the writers for essay mills are increasingly international. Most of the users who log into the Essay Writers Web site are based in

India, according to Alexa, a company that tracks Internet traffic. A student in, say, Wisconsin usually has no idea that the paper he ordered online is being written by someone in another country.

Like Nigeria. Paul Arhewe lives in Lagos, that nation's largest city, and started writing for essay mills in 2005. Back then he didn't have his own computer and had to do all of his research and writing in Internet cafes. Now he works as an online editor for a newspaper, but he still writes essays on the side. In the past three years, he's written more than 200 papers for American and British students. In an online chat, Mr. Arhewe insisted that the work he does is not unethical. "I believe it is another way of learning for the smart and hardworking students," he writes. Only lazy students, Mr. Arhewe says, turn in the papers they purchase.

Mr. Arhewe started writing for Essay Writers after another essay mill cheated him out of several hundred dollars. That incident notwithstanding, he's generally happy with the work and doesn't complain about the pay. He makes between $100 and $350 a month writing essays — not exactly a fortune, but in a country like Nigeria, where more than half the population lives on less than a dollar a day, it's not too bad either.

Mr. Arhewe, who has a master's degree from the University of Lagos, has written research proposals and dissertations in fields like marketing, economics, psychology, and political science. While his English isn't quite perfect, it's passable, and apparently good enough for his clients. Says Mr. Arhewe: "I am enjoying doing what I like and getting paid for it."

WRITE MY DISSERTATION

Some customers of Essay Writers are college freshmen who, if their typo-laden, grammatically challenged order forms are any indication, struggle with even the most basic writing tasks. But along with the usual suspects, there is no shortage of seniors paying for theses and graduate students buying dissertations.

One customer, for example, identifies himself as a Ph.D. student in aerospace engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He or she (there is no name on the order) is interested in purchasing a 200-page dissertation. The student writes that the dissertation must be "well-researched" and includes format requirements and a general outline. Attached to the order is a one-page description of Ph.D. requirements taken directly from MIT's Web site. The student also suggests areas of emphasis like "static and dynamic stability of aircraft controls."

The description is consistent with the kind of research graduate students do, according to Barbara Lechner, director of student services at the institute's department of aeronautics and astronautics. In an initial interview, Ms. Lechner said she would bring up the issue with others in the department. Several weeks later, Ms. Lechner said she was told by higher-ups not to respond to The Chronicle's inquiries.

The head of the department, Ian A. Waitz, says he doesn't believe it's possible, given the highly technical subject matter, for a graduate student to pay someone else to research and write a dissertation. "It seems like a bogus request," says Mr. Waitz, though he wasn't sure why someone would fake such an order. However, like Ms. Lechner, Mr. Waitz acknowledged that the topics in the request are consistent with the department's graduate-level research.

Would-be aerospace engineers aren't the only ones outsourcing their papers. A student at American University's law school ordered a paper for a class called "The Law of Secrecy." She didn't include her full name on the order, but she did identify one of her two professors, Stephen I. Vladeck. Mr. Vladeck — who immediately knew the identity of the student from the description of the paper — was surprised and disappointed because he tries to help students who are having trouble and because he had talked to her about her paper. Mr. Vladeck argues that a law school "has a particular obligation not to tolerate this kind of stuff." The student never actually turned in the paper and took an "incomplete" for the course.

Essay Writers attempts to hide the identities of its customers even from the writers who do the actual work. But it's not always successful. Some students inadvertently include personal information when they upload files to the Web site; others simply put their names at the bottom of their orders.

Jessica Dirr is a graduate student in communication at Northern Kentucky University and an Essay Writers customer. She hired the company to work on her paper "Separated at Birth: Symbolic Boasting and the Greek Twin." Ms. Dirr says she looked online for assistance because the university's writing center wasn't much help and because she had trouble with citation rules. She describes what Essay Writers did as mostly proofreading. "They made some suggestions, and I took their advice," she says. Unfortunately, Ms. Dirr says, the paper "wasn't up to the level my professor was hoping for."

Mickey Tomar paid Essay Writers $100 to research and write a paper on the parables of Jesus Christ for his New Testament class. Mr. Tomar, a senior at James Madison University majoring in philosophy and religion, defends the idea of paying someone else to do your academic work, comparing it to companies that outsource labor. "Like most people in college, you don't have time to do research on some of these things," he says. "I was hoping to find a guy to do some good qual-

ity writing."

Nicole Cohea paid $190 for a 10-page paper on a Dove soap advertising campaign. Ms. Cohea, a senior communications major at the University of Southern Mississippi, wrote in her order that she wanted the company to "add on to what I have already written." She helpfully included an outline for the paper and wondered whether the writer could "add a catchy quote at the beginning."

When asked whether it was wrong, in general, to pay someone else to write your essay, Ms. Cohea responded, "Definitely." But she says she wasn't planning to turn in the paper as her own; instead, she says, she was only going to use it to get ideas. She was not happy with the paper Essay Writers provided. It seemed, she says, to have been written by a non-native English speaker. "I could tell they were Asian or something just by the grammar and stuff," she says.

James F. Kollie writes a sporadically updated blog titled My Ph.D. Journey in which he chronicles the progress he's making toward his doctorate from Walden University. He recently ordered the literature-review portion of his dissertation, "The Political Economy of Privatization in Post-War Developing Countries," from Essay Writers. In the order, he explains that the review should focus on privatization efforts that have failed.

Mr. Kollie acknowledged in an interview that he had placed an order with Essay Writers, but he said it was not related to his dissertation. Rather, he says, it was part of a separate research project he's conducting into online writing services. When asked if his university was aware of the project, he replied, "I don't have time for this," and hung up the phone.

POLICING PLAGIARISM

Some institutions, most notably Boston University, have made efforts to shut down essay mills and expose their customers. A handful of states, including Virginia, have laws on the books making it a misdemeanor to sell college essays. But those laws are rarely, if ever, enforced. And even if a case were brought, it would be extremely difficult to prosecute essay-mill operators living abroad.

So what's a professor to do? Thomas Lancaster, a lecturer in computing at Birmingham City University, in England, wrote his dissertation on plagiarism. In addition, he and a colleague wrote a paper on so-called contract-cheating Web sites that allow writers to bid on students' projects. Their paper concludes that because there is almost never any solid evidence of wrongdoing, catching and disciplining students is the exception.

In his research, Mr. Lancaster has found that students who use these services tend to be regular customers. And while some may be stressed and desperate, many know exactly what they're doing. "You will look and see that the student has put the assignment up within hours of it being released to them," he says. "Which has to mean that they were intending to cheat from the beginning."

What he recommends, and what he does himself, is to sit down with students and question them about the paper or project they've just turned in. If they respond with blank stares and shrugged shoulders, there's a chance they haven't read, much less written, their own paper.

Susan D. Blum suggests assigning papers that can't easily be completed by others, like a personal reflection on that day's lecture. Ms. Blum, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Notre Dame and author of the recently published book *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*, also encourages professors to keep in touch with students as they complete major projects, though she concedes that can be tough in a large lecture class.

But Ms. Blum points out a more fundamental issue. She thinks professors and administrators need to do a better job of talking to students about what college is about and why studying — which may seem like a meaningless obstacle on the path to a credential — actually matters. "Why do they have to go through the process of researching?" she says. "We need to convey that to them."

Mr. Tomar, the philosophy-and-religion major who bought a paper for his New Testament class, still doesn't think students should have to do their own research. But he has soured on essay mills after the paper he received from Essay Writers did not meet his expectations. He complained, and the company gave him a 30-percent refund. As a result, he had an epiphany of sorts. Says Mr. Tomar: "I was like — you know what? — I'm going to write this paper on my own."

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The Shadow Scholar

The man who writes your students' papers tells his story.

By ED DANTE

Editor's note: Ed Dante is a pseudonym for a writer who lives on the East Coast. Through a literary agent, he approached The Chronicle *wanting to tell the story of how he makes a living writing papers for a custom-essay company and to describe the extent of student cheating he has observed. In the course of editing his article,* The Chronicle *reviewed correspondence Dante had with clients and some of the papers he had been paid to write. In the article published here, some details of the assignment he describes have been altered to protect the identity of the student.*

The request came in by e-mail around 2 in the afternoon. It was from a previous customer, and she had urgent business. I quote her message here verbatim (if I had to put up with it, so should you): "You did me business ethics propsal for me I need propsal got approved pls can you will write me paper?"

I've gotten pretty good at interpreting this kind of correspondence. The client had attached a document from her professor with details about the paper. She needed the first section in a week. Seventy-five pages.

I told her no problem.

It truly was no problem. In the past year, I've written roughly 5,000 pages of scholarly literature, most on very tight deadlines. But you won't find my name on a single paper.

I've written toward a master's degree in cognitive psychology, a Ph.D. in sociology, and a handful of postgraduate credits in international diplomacy. I've worked on bachelor's degrees in hospitality, business administration, and accounting. I've written for courses in history, cinema, labor relations, pharmacology, theology, sports management, maritime security, airline services, sustainability, municipal budgeting, marketing, philosophy, ethics, Eastern religion, postmodern architecture, anthropology, literature, and public administration. I've attended three dozen online universities. I've completed 12 graduate theses of 50 pages or more. All for someone else.

You've never heard of me, but there's a good chance that you've read some of my work. I'm a hired gun, a doctor of everything, an academic mercenary. My customers are your students. I promise you that. Somebody in your classroom uses a service that you can't detect, that you can't defend against, that you may not even know exists.

I work at an online company that generates tens of thousands of dollars a month by creating original essays based on specific instructions provided by cheating students. I've worked there full time since 2004. On any day of the academic year, I am working on upward of 20 assignments.

In the midst of this great recession, business is booming. At busy times, during midterms and finals, my company's staff of roughly 50 writers is not large enough to satisfy the demands of students who will pay for our work and claim it as their own.

You would be amazed by the incompetence of your students' writing. I have seen the word "desperate" misspelled every way you can imagine. And these students truly are desperate. They couldn't write a convincing grocery list, yet they are in graduate school. They really need help. They need help learning and, separately, they need help passing their courses. But they aren't getting it.

For those of you who have ever mentored a student through the writing of a dissertation, served on a thesis-review committee, or guided a graduate student through a formal research process, I have a question: Do you ever wonder how a student who struggles to formulate complete sentences in conversation manages to produce marginally competent research? How does that student get by you?

I live well on the desperation, misery, and incompetence that your educational system has created. Granted, as a writer, I could earn more; certainly there are ways to earn less. But I never struggle to find work. And as my peers trudge through thankless office jobs that seem more intolerable with every passing month of our sustained recession, I am on pace for my best year yet. I will make roughly $66,000 this year. Not a king's ransom, but higher than what many actual educators are paid.

Of course, I know you are aware that cheating occurs. But you have no idea how deeply this kind of cheating penetrates the academic system, much less how to stop it. Last summer *The New York Times* reported that 61 percent of undergraduates have admitted to some form of cheating on assignments and exams. Yet there is little discussion about custom papers and how they differ from more-detectable forms of plagiarism, or about why students cheat in the first place.

It is my hope that this essay will initiate such a conversation. As for me, I'm planning to retire. I'm tired of helping you make your students look competent.

It is late in the semester when the business student contacts me, a time when I typically juggle deadlines and push out 20 to 40 pages a day. I had written a short research proposal for her a few weeks before, suggesting a project that connected a surge of unethical business practices to the patterns of trade liberalization. The proposal was approved, and now I had six days to complete the assignment. This was not quite a rush order, which we get top dollar to write. This assignment would be priced at a standard $2,000, half of which goes in my pocket.

A few hours after I had agreed to write the paper, I received the following e-mail: "sending sorces for ur to use thanx."

I did not reply immediately. One hour later, I received another message:

"did u get the sorce I send
please where you are now?
Desprit to pass spring projict"

Not only was this student going to be a constant thorn in my side, but she also communicated in haiku, each less decipherable than the one before it. I let her know that I was giving her work the utmost attention, that I had received her sources, and that I would be in touch if I had any questions. Then I put it aside.

From my experience, three demographic groups seek out my services: the English-as-second-language student; the hopelessly deficient student; and the lazy rich kid.

For the last, colleges are a perfect launching ground—they are built to reward the rich and to forgive them their laziness. Let's be honest: The successful among us are not always the best and the brightest, and certainly not the most ethical. My favorite customers are those with an unlimited supply of money and no shortage of instructions on how they would like to see their work executed. While the deficient student will generally not know how to ask for what he wants until he doesn't get it, the lazy rich student will know exactly what he wants. He is poised for a life of paying others and telling them what to do. Indeed, he is acquiring all the skills he needs to stay on top.

As for the first two types of students—the ESL and the hopelessly deficient—colleges are utterly failing them. Students who come to American universities from other countries find that their efforts to learn a new language are confounded not only by cultural difficulties but also by the pressures of grading. The focus on evaluation rather than education means that those who haven't mastered English must do so quickly or suffer the consequences. My service provides a particularly quick way to "master" English. And those who are hopelessly deficient—a euphemism, I admit—struggle with communication in general.

Two days had passed since I last heard from the business student. Overnight I had received 14 e-mails from her. She had additional instructions for the assignment, such as "but more again please make sure they are a good link betwee the leticture review and all the chapter and the benfet of my paper. finally do you think the level of this work? how match i can get it?"

I'll admit, I didn't fully understand that one.

It was followed by some clarification: "where u are can you get my messages? Please I pay a lot and dont have ao to faile I strated to get very worry."

Her messages had arrived between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. Again I assured her I had the matter under control.

It was true. At this point, there are few academic challenges that I find intimidating. You name it, I've been paid to write about it.

Customers' orders are endlessly different yet strangely all the same. No matter what the subject, clients want to be assured that their assignment is in capable hands. It would be terrible to think that your Ivy League graduate thesis was riding on the work ethic and perspicacity of a public-university slacker. So part of my job is to be whatever my clients want me to be. I say yes when I am asked if I have a Ph.D. in sociology. I say yes when I am asked if I have professional training in industrial/organizational psychology. I say yes when asked if I have ever designed a perpetual-motion-powered time machine and documented my efforts in a peer-reviewed journal.

The subject matter, the grade level, the college, the course—these things are irrelevant to me. Prices are determined per page and are based on how long I have to complete the assignment. As long as it doesn't require me to do any math or video-documented animal husbandry, I will write anything.

I have completed countless online courses. Stu-

dents provide me with passwords and user names so I can access key documents and online exams. In some instances, I have even contributed to weekly online discussions with other students in the class.

I have become a master of the admissions essay. I have written these for undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs, some at elite universities. I can explain exactly why you're Brown material, why the Wharton M.B.A. program would benefit from your presence, how certain life experiences have prepared you for the rigors of your chosen course of study. I do not mean to be insensitive, but I can't tell you how many times I've been paid to write about somebody helping a loved one battle cancer. I've written essays that could be adapted into Meryl Streep movies.

I do a lot of work for seminary students. I like seminary students. They seem so blissfully unaware of the inherent contradiction in paying somebody to help them cheat in courses that are largely about walking in the light of God and providing an ethical model for others to follow. I have been commissioned to write many a passionate condemnation of America's moral decay as exemplified by abortion, gay marriage, or the teaching of evolution. All in all, we may presume that clerical authorities see these as a greater threat than the plagiarism committed by the future frocked.

With respect to America's nurses, fear not. Our lives are in capable hands—just hands that can't write a lick. Nursing students account for one of my company's biggest customer bases. I've written case-management plans, reports on nursing ethics, and essays on why nurse practitioners are lighting the way to the future of medicine. I've even written pharmaceutical-treatment courses, for patients who I hope were hypothetical.

I, who have no name, no opinions, and no style, have written so many papers at this point, including legal briefs, military-strategy assessments, poems, lab reports, and, yes, even papers on academic integrity, that it's hard to determine which course of study is most infested with cheating. But I'd say education is the worst. I've written papers for students in elementary-education programs, special-education majors, and ESL-training courses. I've written lesson plans for aspiring high-school teachers, and I've synthesized reports from notes that customers have taken during classroom observations. I've written essays for those studying to become school administrators, and I've completed theses for those on course to become principals. In the enormous conspiracy that is student cheating, the frontline intelligence community is infiltrated by double agents. (Future educators of America, I know who you are.)

As the deadline for the business-ethics paper approaches, I think about what's ahead of me. Whenever I take on an assignment this large, I get a certain physical sensation. My body says: Are you sure you want to do this again? You know how much it hurt the last time. You know this student will be with you for a long time. You know you will become her emergency contact, her guidance counselor and life raft. You know that for the 48 hours that you dedicate to writing this paper, you will cease all human functions but typing, you will Google until the term has lost all meaning, and you will drink enough coffee to fuel a revolution in a small Central American country.

But then there's the money, the sense that I must capitalize on opportunity, and even a bit of a thrill in seeing whether I can do it.

And I can. It's not implausible to write a 75-page paper in two days. It's just miserable. I don't need much sleep, and when I get cranking, I can churn out four or five pages an hour. First I lay out the sections of an assignment—introduction, problem statement, methodology, literature review, findings, conclusion—whatever the instructions call for. Then I start Googling.

I haven't been to a library once since I started doing this job. Amazon is quite generous about free samples. If I can find a single page from a particular text, I can cobble that into a report, deducing what I don't know from customer reviews and publisher blurbs. Google Scholar is a great source for material, providing the abstract of nearly any journal article. And of course, there's Wikipedia, which is often my first stop when dealing with unfamiliar subjects. Naturally one must verify such material elsewhere, but I've taken hundreds of crash courses this way.

After I've gathered my sources, I pull out usable quotes, cite them, and distribute them among the sections of the assignment. Over the years, I've refined ways of stretching papers. I can write a four-word sentence in 40 words. Just give me one phrase of quotable text, and I'll produce two pages of ponderous explanation. I can say in 10 pages what most normal people could say in a paragraph.

I've also got a mental library of stock academic phrases: "A close consideration of the events which occurred in _____ during the _____ demonstrate that _____ had entered into a phase of widespread cultural, social, and economic change that would define _____ for decades to come." Fill in the blanks using words provided by the professor in the assignment's instructions.

How good is the product created by this process? That depends—on the day, my mood, how many other assignments I am working on. It also depends on the customer, his or her expectations, and the degree to which the completed work exceeds his or her abilities. I don't ever edit my assignments. That way I get fewer customer requests to "dumb it down." So some of my work is great. Some of it is not so great. Most of my clients do not have the wherewithal to tell the difference, which probably means that in most cases the work

is better than what the student would have produced on his or her own. I've actually had customers thank me for being clever enough to insert typos. "Nice touch," they'll say.

I've read enough academic material to know that I'm not the only bullshit artist out there. I think about how Dickens got paid per word and how, as a result, *Bleak House* is ... well, let's be diplomatic and say exhaustive. Dickens is a role model for me.

So how does someone become a custom-paper writer? The story of how I got into this job may be instructive. It is mostly about the tremendous disappointment that awaited me in college.

My distaste for the early hours and regimented nature of high school was tempered by the promise of the educational community ahead, with its free exchange of ideas and access to great minds. How dispiriting to find out that college was just another place where grades were grubbed, competition overshadowed personal growth, and the threat of failure was used to encourage learning.

Although my university experience did not live up to its vaunted reputation, it did lead me to where I am today. I was raised in an upper-middle-class family, but I went to college in a poor neighborhood. I fit in really well: After paying my tuition, I didn't have a cent to my name. I had nothing but a meal plan and my roommate's computer. But I was determined to write for a living, and, moreover, to spend these extremely expensive years learning how to do so. When I completed my first novel, in the summer between sophomore and junior years, I contacted the English department about creating an independent study around editing and publishing it. I was received like a mental patient. I was told, "There's nothing like that here." I was told that I could go back to my classes, sit in my lectures, and fill out Scantron tests until I graduated.

I didn't much care for my classes, though. I slept late and spent the afternoons working on my own material. Then a funny thing happened. Here I was, begging anybody in authority to take my work seriously. But my classmates did. They saw my abilities and my abundance of free time. They saw a value that the university did not.

It turned out that my lazy, Xanax-snorting, Miller-swilling classmates were thrilled to pay me to write their papers. And I was thrilled to take their money. Imagine you are crumbling under the weight of university-issued parking tickets and self-doubt when a frat boy offers you cash to write about Plato. Doing that job was a no-brainer. Word of my services spread quickly, especially through the fraternities. Soon I was receiving calls from strangers who wanted to commission my work. I was a writer!

Nearly a decade later, students, not publishers, still come from everywhere to find me.

I work hard for a living. I'm nice to people. But I understand that in simple terms, I'm the bad guy. I see where I'm vulnerable to ethical scrutiny.

But pointing the finger at me is too easy. Why does my business thrive? Why do so many students prefer to cheat rather than do their own work?

Say what you want about me, but I am not the reason your students cheat.

You know what's never happened? I've never had a client complain that he'd been expelled from school, that the originality of his work had been questioned, that some disciplinary action had been taken. As far as I know, not one of my customers has ever been caught.

With just two days to go, I was finally ready to throw myself into the business assignment. I turned off my phone, caged myself in my office, and went through the purgatory of cramming the summation of a student's alleged education into a weekend. Try it sometime. After the 20th hour on a single subject, you have an almost-out-of-body experience.

My client was thrilled with my work. She told me that she would present the chapter to her mentor and get back to me with our next steps. Two weeks passed, by which time the assignment was but a distant memory, obscured by the several hundred pages I had written since. On a Wednesday evening, I received the following e-mail:

"Thanx u so much for the chapter is going very good the porfesser likes it but wants the folloing suggestions please what do you thing?:

"'The hypothesis is interesting but I'd like to see it a bit more focused. Choose a specific connection and try to prove it.'

"What shoudwe say?"

This happens a lot. I get paid per assignment. But with longer papers, the student starts to think of me as a personal educational counselor. She paid me to write a one-page response to her professor, and then she paid me to revise her paper. I completed each of these assignments, sustaining the voice that the student had established and maintaining the front of competence from some invisible location far beneath the ivory tower.

The 75-page paper on business ethics ultimately expanded into a 160-page graduate thesis, every word of which was written by me. I can't remember the name of my client, but it's her name on my work. We collaborated for months. As with so many other topics I tackle, the connection between unethical business practices and trade liberalization became a subtext to my everyday life.

So, of course, you can imagine my excitement when I received the good news:

"thanx so much for uhelp ican going to graduate to now".

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