

The Business of Academic Cheating – An Insider’s Look



For more than 20 years, I have taught prep classes for the SATs, LSATs, GMATs, GREs, and other standardized tests. I have proctored at least a dozen SAT sessions. During these years, I have been made serious offers (bribes) to cheat on behalf of test-takers at least once a year. After the admissions-for-pay cheating scandal broke on Tuesday, a fellow LSAT instructor casually mentioned that the best recent bribe offered to her, to take the pre-law test (LSAT) on behalf of someone else, was \$10,000.

I’m not surprised by the scandal. I’m only surprised that the cheating parents were foolish enough to pay far more than the going rate. And I am about to tell you – from the inside – that this business of academic fraud is much deeper, much wider, and much more disturbing than most of you even know. And “business” is the right word. The exact word.

Since 2016, I have done freelancing through a commercial site that connects freelancers with clients. This is a big-name

platform – traded on the New York Stock Exchange; heavily advertised. Despite that, and despite its own Terms of Service (which officially prohibit any activities that “would violate.. the academic policies of any educational institution”), clients openly list jobs that solicit freelancers to do everything from completing high-school homework to writing PhD theses.

The site sponsors chat forums, and in these forums a few of us freelancers rant and complain and pretty much set our hair on fire about the academic fraud. I have saved literally hundreds of screenshots showing what I consider to be the incompetence and indifference of site management regarding the problem of cheating for hire. The job postings persist long enough for the clients to hire a dodgy freelancer (often a day or more, after multiple “flags” by the honest freelancers), and, maddeningly, the complaints of the honest freelancers actually provoke scolding from Forum Moderators.

Example: I wrote in the Forum to complain about a job that had been live for 11 hours, the TITLE of which was: “I need a writer to compose a 1000-word essay for a high-school literature class.” The subject of the essay was “George Orwell’s novel 1984.” The job and the blatant academic fraud seemed to be less a problem for the site than was my own obnoxious nagging. My complaint was immediately removed, and I received a scolding note from a Moderator, telling me that my posting had been “reported” (?? by whom??) and that it was “off topic.”

I have made a sort of cottage industry of reporting academic fraud – sometimes discovered because potential cheaters contact me directly, when they see that I do work with standardized tests and college applications. My efforts to gain the attention and provoke action by the folks who run the freelancing site itself meet with what I will generously term “tepid responses.” (If I had a good lawyer on retainer, I would use stronger language!) I have better success when I

contact individual professors and deans at specific academic institutions. (Some of these would-be cheaters/"clients" are careless enough to include class handouts and other identifying materials in their job postings. Not the brightest lot.)

Some of the institutions I have contacted, or whose students are involved (mere tip of this distressing iceberg): Columbia University; UCLA; UConn School of Pharmacy; Syracuse University (*best known result of all in holding the involved student accountable!*); UNC; St. Mary's; CUNY; University of Miami; USC; University of Nevada. There are dozens more.

As I said, the parents nabbed by the FBI on Tuesday overpaid for their scamming. My files contain a screenshot from a typical job posting: "Write my Law School Personal Statement." Another file details a request that came directly to me from a Chinese girl who wanted a re-write of her application essay to NYU. Each job offered less than \$100. (The clients are both stupid *and* cheap.)

One of the two most overtly irate professors whom I contacted teaches at a school in the western U.S. that I cannot name, because the professor assured me (as do approximately half of the professors with whom I speak), that even though he could identify the offending student, and was also fairly confident that this was a repeat offense, he was also frustratedly certain, based on past experience, that "my administration won't back me up." At first I was shocked when I heard that from some professors; now, I am not surprised; only sad. (The clear exception: law schools. Law deans are not afraid of their students!)

The other most irate professor (from among many) was from the University of Toronto, He turned out to be not only a wronged academic, but also a client of the business site – through which his own student was attempting to hire a collaborator to defraud him! The professor contacted the site and "let them

have it!" He told me that he was "stonewalled," and copies of his correspondence corroborate that.

This sad and tawdry business is not limited to any single on-line site. Nor, as you can see, to any particular type of school. The subjects and projects cover a spectrum, as well: "Business Ethics" and re-writing a paper from an "Ethics Class" (yes, of course, irony abundant!); a physics exam; an on-line algebra/trig exam; a paper on "Global Poverty"; essays for an International Baccalaureate class; work on quadratic equations; a "hydrogen lab"; a paper on theology (pathetic!); a paper on "Pack Rat Middens" (a "midden" is a dunghill or refuse heap); an essay on international health law; work on speech pathology... I've reported wanna-be cheaters from all disciplines.

Left to their own devices, without the help of the cheating industry, these students would likely stumble badly and fail – and *hurrah* to honest failure! I read the original essay by the kid from the "Ethics Class": it was terrible, and his grade was a well-deserved D-plus. I say a pox on all their houses – they're all a bunch of D-plus rats who belong in a midden heap!