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The Perfect Score

Student cheating is reaching new levels,forcing an overhaul of standardized tests.

Chris doesn't consider himself a cheater. Yet for the past four years, the 21-year-old senior at one of California's most prestigious universities (which he doesn't want identified) has used an arsenal of tricks to pass his classes. He's plagiarized, taken illegal prescription drugs to improve his focus, obtained exam questions in advance and text-messaged his friends via cell phone to find quick answers to tough questions. Still, he doesn't see any of that as out of the ordinary. "Sure, I've used test banks, study drugs, text buddies, cyberessays and picture messaging," he says. "But so does everyone."

That may be an exaggeration—but not as big of one as you might think. From Beijing to Bristol, the rates of academic cheating have skyrocketed during the past decade. In a huge study of 50,000 college and 18,000 high-school students in the United States by Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity, more than 70 percent admitted to having cheated. That's up from about 56 percent in 1993 and just 26 percent in 1963. Internet plagiarism has quadrupled in the past six years, according to the same study. In Britain, a recent government-sponsored report found such rampant cheating in the state-run GCSE and A-level exams that Secretary of Education Ruth Kelly called for a total revamp of the coursework system before 2008. Hundreds of Asian universities' Web-based bulletin boards are dumping grounds for the memorized answers to Test of English as a Foreign Language questions—the basis of most U.S. colleges' admittance of foreign students.

Nearly all of India's ultracompetitive entrance exams have been stolen and sold to students at least once during the past five years. In 2004 students paid up to $15,000 apiece for access to answers to India's Pre-Medical Test—and the perpetrators pocketed $1 million. In China, where the number of university students has almost tripled since 1998 to 16 million, police last year cracked one of the biggest *qiangshou* (hired gun) gangs—Web-based agencies where students can hire expert look-alikes to take any of a host of national exams for them. The gang had already taken in $212,000 from nearly 1,000 students in 19 provinces across the country. Also in 2005, South Korea faced the biggest exam-cheating scandal in its history when officials realized that the previous fall's national college-entrance exam, the CSAT, had been infiltrated by more than 20 cheating rings across the country; they had text-messaged exam answers to paying students taking the test. "We've passed the tipping point, where cheating is so common that it's an accepted social norm," says David Callahan, author of "The Cheating Culture."

What's turning students into crooks? First and foremost, technological advances have made cheating easier than ever. From purchasing "original" essays from Web sites like Gradesaver.com to "outsourcing" computer-programming homework to experts in India via sites like Rentacoder.com, students can now buy A's for the price of a school lunch. At the same time, mobile phones and MP3 players have given test takers new tools: picture messaging lets them contact friends outside the classroom with photographed copies of whole exams. SparkMobile, a new service from SparkNotes (Barnes & Noble's take on Cliffs Notes), will text students themes to use for surprise in-class essays or beam them iPod-friendly audio summaries of classic novels. Competition, though, is the real culprit. As the work force becomes ever more crowded and the number of college grads skyrockets, top educational credentials are increasingly seen as the only sure vehicle to success. Thirty-five years ago, just 11 percent of Americans had a college degree; now nearly a third do. In the European Union, the number of university graduates has shot up by 30 percent in the past five years alone. In hypercompetitive Asia, where most academic achievement is measured by standardized tests, that can lead to excruciating pressure. "Your exams are so closely connected to your admission to college that a 0.1 percent difference can determine whether you get admitted or not," says Sudha Ravi, vice principal at a prestigious New Delhi secondary school.

Sociologists argue that the upsurge in school dishonesty also reflects attitudes in the culture at large, where cheating has become acceptable and even admired. International tycoons make enviable fortunes through market manipulation and fraud: think Enron, WorldCom and Martha Stewart. Scientists like South Korea's once revered stem-cell research pioneer, Hwang Woo Suk, fake lab results. In a recent poll of 25,000 high-schoolers by the California-based Josephson Institute of Ethics, nearly half agreed with the statement "A person has to lie or cheat sometimes in order to succeed." In Australia, a new study from Griffith University of students at four major campuses revealed that 40 percent believe faking research results is a "minor" offense. "Students feel like it's just no longer a big deal to cheat," says Don McCabe, the founder of Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity.

The problem is so pervasive that it's reshaping the face of academic admissions. In the future, exams from the SAT to the MCAT to the A-levels will be administered in secure rooms equipped with metal detectors, radio-frequency locators to check if students are receiving text-messaged answers on their mobile phones and, in China and South Korea at least, the threat of up to seven-year prison sentences for cheats. This year the world's most respected graduate entrance test, the GRE, which is taken by half a million students annually, is undergoing the biggest face-lift in its 55-year history. Starting this October, exam questions will be changed from test to test. Start times will be staggered across the globe so students in Los Angeles can't post memorized or photographed test sheets on the Web for students in Hong Kong. "We've basically revolutionized the way we're administering our high-stakes tests," says Ray Nicosia, director of security for the world's largest test administrator, the Princeton, New Jersey-based Educational Testing Service, which runs 25,000 test centers in 192 countries. "We're changing to combat this problem."

America's med-school en-trance exam, the MCAT, is stepping up security measures using biometrics. As of next year, would-be doctors will have to give electronic fingerprints and submit to digital photographs, making it easier for exam boards to catch cheaters who pay others to take the tests for them. The SAT last year added a writing section which, says Nicosia, provides a "substantive handwriting exemplar" to authenticate test takers. South Korea's Ministry of Education has introduced metal detectors for bathroom visits. In India, testing bodies have limited the number of administrators with early access to the exams.

European exams like Britain's GCSE and A-levels and France's baccalaureate are arming themselves with plagiarism-spotting software, like TurnItIn.com and MyDropBox.com, which compare student papers with everything available on the Internet and highlight copied sections in bright red. Some top institutions in the United States and Europe have even "legalized cheating." They now allow students to surf the Web on PDAs and laptops during "open Internet" exams.

Proponents argue that this helps students learn research skills more applicable to real-life work situations, where information is freely available.

At the same time, a growing number of top universities are reducing their emphasis on standardized tests. Many are even beginning to throw them out altogether in favor of interviews and recommendations—markers of aptitude that can't be faked. The rising incidence of scoring errors has only heightened their concerns; just two weeks ago the U.S. College Board revealed that some 4,000 scores from last October's SAT had been miscalculated—some by as much as 400 points. "I do see a rise in alternative ways to augment the scores," says Gary Natriello, an education professor at Columbia University's Teachers College. "People are looking for those other signs that a student has a lot of potential."

Will standardized tests ever become obsolete? According to the Massachusetts-based National Center for Fair & Open Testing, some 730 American colleges no longer require undergrad applicants to take either the SAT or the ACT. In Britain, Oxford and Cambridge used to interview top candidates once; now final decisions are made after two interviews. Marlyn McGrath Lewis, the director of admissions for Harvard College, says more and more universities are adopting a "holistic approach to admissions"—and that's essential. "The quality of [the class] depends on it." Not to mention the quality of the education.

By Emily Flynn Vencat
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