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Harvard cheating inquiry raises concerns

By Martine Powers | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 26, 2013



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Harvard University in Cambridge.

Last August, when Harvard administrators announced they were grappling with the largest Ivy League cheating scandal in recent memory, they said they would hear the cases of 125 students within a few weeks.

But instead of learning their fates in September, many of the accused and their families say they faced a series of delays and drifting deadlines as hearings continued through December.

While Harvard said this week that it has completed the investigations and would announce results in coming days, students say the drawn-out process brought nerve-racking uncertainty. Some undergraduates learned about their involvement in the case well after the initial announcement, and the number of implicated students swelled.

The investigations have exacted a financial toll on some students who paid thousands of dollars for nearly a full semester only to be told before finals that they would be required to withdraw for two semesters, the most common punishment for those found guilty.

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The scope of the cheating allegations has also raised questions about Harvard's Administrative Board, a body of 30 - administrators and faculty that handles disciplinary problems. Members of the Harvard community argue the panel was ill-equipped to handle scores of cases, that the delays were unfair to students, and that some were unjustly found guilty.

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“At the beginning, it seemed as if things were going to move along fairly swiftly,” said one student, who like others spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of not being readmitted - after his year away from school. “But it didn’t.”

The students were charged with the most grievous of academic crimes, particularly on a campus of high achievers. Several argue that similarities between their exams came not from cheating, but from help provided by teaching fellows or the fact that many shared lecture notes, a practice encouraged by the professor.

Many were shocked when they were found guilty.

“It’s easy to be dramatic about it in the moment, but it really felt like my life was over,” the student said.

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‘It seems that a lot of the cases were much more complicated and much grayer.’ - Harry Lewis, Former dean of Harvard College

The student, an athlete, was given the option by his resident dean of finishing out the last few days of fall semester. However, he decided to withdraw days before the term ended. After months of distress, he was struggling in classes and because of NCAA eligibility rules, waiting until spring semester to withdraw would require him to sit out two years before playing his sport again.

“All his good work and all our tuition money — gone, with no credit and no value,” said the student’s father. “To spend a whole semester working your tail off, then to be forced to the decision of having to withdraw — it’s not fair.”

Some students who were not given the option of finishing out the semester are considering a legal challenge to recoup the value of their tuition, some students and lawyers said.

Robert L. Peabody, a lawyer with Collora LLP in Boston, said he is representing two of the students.

“Each time I saw these students, you could see the strain and worry on their faces,” he said. “It would have been better had the process been more refined and streamlined and if the process were done earlier.”

Jeff Neal, spokesman for Harvard, said administrators did not want to rush investigations because they wanted to provide students with a fair hearing.

“The cases were exceptionally complex and involved far more students than any other set of cases in recent memory, requiring great amounts of time and effort from the staff and faculty involved,” he said.

The class at issue was Government 1310: Introduction to Congress, taught by assistant professor Matthew Platt. The exam in question was the last of four take-home exams, 25 percent of students’ final grades. They had one week to complete the test.

According to the Harvard Crimson, a teaching fellow first noticed identical phrases in just a handful of exams, including multiple appearances of the number “22, 500” — with an errant space in the middle of the figure.

As tests were examined more closely over the course of the summer, more were flagged.

Some students say similarities in answers arose because they based their work on shared notes. During Platt's first lecture, students say, he announced that it was unnecessary to attend lectures or discussion sessions; students were free to get the notes from their friends.

Other students said teaching fellows helped students answer the exam questions in discussion sections held during the exam period.

Platt did not respond to requests for comment.

After the scandal broke, administrators suggested the process would conclude in the early part of the semester, while resident deans were told to advise student athletes to consider withdrawing.

Some did. Others held out, taking the risk of staying in school in the hope that they would be exonerated or that if they were found guilty, they would find out while much of their semester's tuition could be prorated and recouped.

It was a stressful process for students. Like clockwork every Tuesday night, another flurry of decisions was handed out and more students would suddenly disappear from classes and team practices.

The magnitude of the inquiry meant that students appeared before a subcommittee of three members of the Administrative Board. Students said they never had the chance to appear before the full board, which voted on their cases.

Others criticized what they say is the conflict of interest in the role played by resident deans.

Most of the time, these deans, members of the faculty, serve as academic advisers. But in Administrative Board investigations, their conversations are not privileged; share a damning detail with your dean, and the rest of the board will probably know.

"It's almost unfair not to have a lawyer in the room," said a student who was eventually exonerated. "These are Harvard professors, incredibly smart people. They know what they're doing. It's not supposed to be adversarial, but it felt very adversarial."

Harvard has also taken heat from its alumni community. In a letter to president Drew Faust this month, Harvard graduate Thomas G. Stemberg, cofounder of Staples and a prominent fund-raiser for the college's basketball program, lambasted the university's response.

"How can one come to any conclusion other than the university has a bloated bureaucracy so intent on being politically correct that its students and its mission are forgotten?" wrote Stemberg.

Former Harvard College dean Harry Lewis said he wished the episode had prompted more soul-searching within the university on the value of take-home exams. Administrators should have used more discretion, he said, because of "the mismanagement of the course."

"I'm certainly not suggesting that Harvard should have walked away from people who did a cut-and-paste job and turned in lots of verbatim text," Lewis said. "But it seems that a lot of the cases were much more complicated and much grayer."

Other Ivy League schools have handled such large-scale allegations more circumspectly.

In 2000, Dartmouth College accused 78 students of cheating in a computer science class. Some had found homework answers on the class's online web server, accidentally left unprotected by a password. Others received the answers from teaching fellows who thought they had the professor's permission to discuss solutions.

James Larimore, dean of Dartmouth at the time, said the school's disciplinary board conducted extensive investigations before deciding to drop the charges for fear of unfairly punishing some students.

"Ultimately . . . the committee was frustrated by its inability to determine with reasonable confidence which individuals had cheated and to reliably distinguish students who had engaged in academic dishonesty from classmates who had sought and used help that they assumed was appropriate," Larimore said.

The similarities, Lewis said, are striking.

"Harvard probably should have done what Dartmouth did," he said.

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