**Chapter 1 Cases**

**Case 1-1 Harvard Cheating Scandal**

Yes. Cheating occurs at the prestigious Harvard University. In 2012, Harvard forced dozens of students to leave in its largest cheating scandal in memory, but the institution would not address assertions that the blame rested partly with a professor and his teaching assistants. The issue is whether cheating is truly cheating when students collaborate with each other to find the right answer—in a take-home final exam.

Harvard released the results of its investigation into the controversy, in which 125 undergraduates were alleged to have cheated on an exam in May 2012. The university said that more than half of the students were forced to withdraw, a penalty that typically lasts from two to four semesters. Many returned by 2015. Of the remaining cases, about half were put on disciplinary probation—a strong warning that becomes part of a student’s official record. The rest of the students avoided punishment.

In previous years, students thought of Government 1310 as an easy class with optional attendance and frequent collaboration. But students who took it in spring 2012 said that it had suddenly become quite difficult, with tests that were hard to comprehend, so they sought help from the graduate teaching assistants who ran the class discussion groups, graded assignments, and advised them on interpreting exam questions.

Administrators said that on final-exam questions, some students supplied identical answers (right down to typographical errors in some cases), indicating that they had written them together or plagiarized them. But some students claimed that the similarities in their answers were due to sharing notes or sitting in on sessions with the same teaching assistants. The instructions on the take-home exam explicitly prohibited collaboration, but many students said they did not think that included talking with teaching assistants.

The first page of the exam contained these instructions: “The exam is completely open book, open note, open Internet, etc. However, in all other regards, this should fall under similar guidelines that apply to in-class exams. More specifically, students may not discuss the exam with others—this includes resident tutors, writing centers, etc.”

Students complained about confusing questions on the final exam. Due to “some good questions” from students, the instructor clarified three exam questions by email before the due date of the exams.

Students claim to have believed that collaboration was allowed in the course. The course’s instructor and the teaching assistants sometimes encouraged collaboration, in fact. The teaching assistants—graduate students who graded the exams and ran weekly discussion sessions—varied widely in how they prepared students for the exams, so it was common for students in different sections to share lecture notes and reading materials. During the final exam, some teaching assistants even worked with students to define unfamiliar terms and help them figure out exactly what certain test questions were asking.

Some have questioned whether it is the test’s design, rather than the students’ conduct, that should be criticized. Others place the blame on the teaching assistants who opened the door to collaboration outside of class by their own behavior in helping students to understand the questions better.

An interesting part of the scandal is that, in March 2013, administrators searched e-mail accounts of some junior faculty members, looking for the source of leaks to the news media about the cheating investigation, prompting much of the faculty to protest what it called a breach of trust.

Harvard adopted an honor code on May 6, 2014. The goal is to establish a culture of academic integrity at the university.

Answer the following questions about the Harvard cheating scandal.

1. **Using Josephson’s Six Pillars of Character, which of the character traits (virtues) apply to the Harvard cheating scandal and how do they apply with respect to the actions of each of the stakeholders in this case?**

The stakeholders in this case are the students in the class who did cheat, the students in the class who did not cheat, the professor, the teaching assistants, other students at the university, alumni of the university, parent of students and future employers of the students.

The students who did not cheat displayed trustworthiness, including honesty, integrity and reliability, respect, responsibility and fairness. The students who did cheat acted out of self-interest. The professor and teaching assistant did not seem to communicate clearly or possibly consistently to all students which may be viewed as a lack of caring or fairness. The other stakeholders are the innocent bystanders in the scandal including the university community at large that want the reputation of Harvard to be upheld.

1. **Who is at fault for the cheating scandal? Is it the students, the teaching assistants, the professor, or the institution? Use ethical reasoning to support your answer.**

The Harvard cheating scandal is not black or white from an ethical perspective. One way to evaluate it is by examining the behavior and actions of the stakeholders. The instructor is partly to blame because unclear questions had to be clarified and that would have promoted collaboration to better understand just what the instructor’s intentions were.

For the instructor, the students’ collaborative work does make it difficult to assess individual performance—because many people’s answers sounded similar, instructors could not determine who really understood the work and who was merely free-riding. As a professor, this is why a group project may require oral presentations so individual effort can be assessed and graded.

# Ironically, the motto of Harvard, the oldest education institution in the U.S. and founded in 1636, is “Veritas,” which means truth in Latin. The truth is Harvard relied too heavily on students being honest – honoring its honor code – in a time when student cheating is rampant. An interesting perspective on the Harvard cheating scandal and cheating in college in general is a *Time* article “Harvard Cheating Scandal: Is Academic Dishonesty on the Rise?” by [Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis](http://ideas.time.com/contributor/erika-christakis-and-nicholas-a-christakis/), Sept. 04, 2012, <http://ideas.time.com/2012/09/04/harvard-cheating-scandal-is-academic-dishonesty-on-the-rise/>.

1. **Do you think Harvard had a right to search the e-mail accounts of junior faculty, looking for the source of leaks to the news media? Explain.**

Harvard had a right to set policies on using university owned computers and university provided email accounts. Most organizations with a computer and email usage policies state whether the organization reserves the right to monitor email usage and to review Internet history on computers. If Harvard did not have such a policy, then such a search seems to be vendetta search against the leak. Had Harvard or any of the faculty previously spoken to the press? Could the leak have come from a student? Did Harvard search the email accounts of the students at Harvard?

On March 9, 2013, the Boston Globe reported that Harvard administrators secretly accessed the email accounts of 16 resident deans in an attempt to determine who leaked communication regarding the Government 1310 cheating scandal that made its way to the media.

The searches, reported on the basis of interviews with “several Harvard officials,” were for the origin of the leak of an internal email sent on August 16, 2012 by Secretary of the Administrative Board John “Jay” L. Ellison. That internal email, in which Ellison advised his colleagues about how to counsel athletes and other students implicated in the scandal, had been forwarded by a resident dean to one of his students.

Administrators informed the resident dean who had forwarded Ellison’s email of the search shortly after it occurred, but did not tell the other resident deans until after being approached by the Globe. The Globe article noted that administrators searched one of two Harvard email accounts belonging to resident deans—the account for administrative matters, rather than for personal ones. Also, Harvard information technology employees were told to look only for certain email subject lines and not to read the contents of messages themselves, the Globe reported. (Source: <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/3/9/cheating-leak-email-search/>).

1. **What is meant by the culture of an organization? Can an honor code establish a culture of academic integrity in an institution such as Harvard University?**

Every organization creates its own culture and normal operating procedures. The culture is highly influenced by the top officers and what is rewarded in the organization. A university is based on a principle of shared governance with administrators and faculty. Under shared governance, a task force or committee composed of administrators, faculty and students would have held many discussions of what an honor code does, what it should say, and the policies and procedures for when the honor code is not followed. Those discussions should encourage all to follow the prescribed standards and it brings the buy in of all and starts to change the culture. No honor code, policy or laws can eliminate all cheating but it can set the expectations.

Video Links:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PBsVH68Iig>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF91EwL-qEQ>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUfbrj28r4c>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bH4k9DTdLkA>