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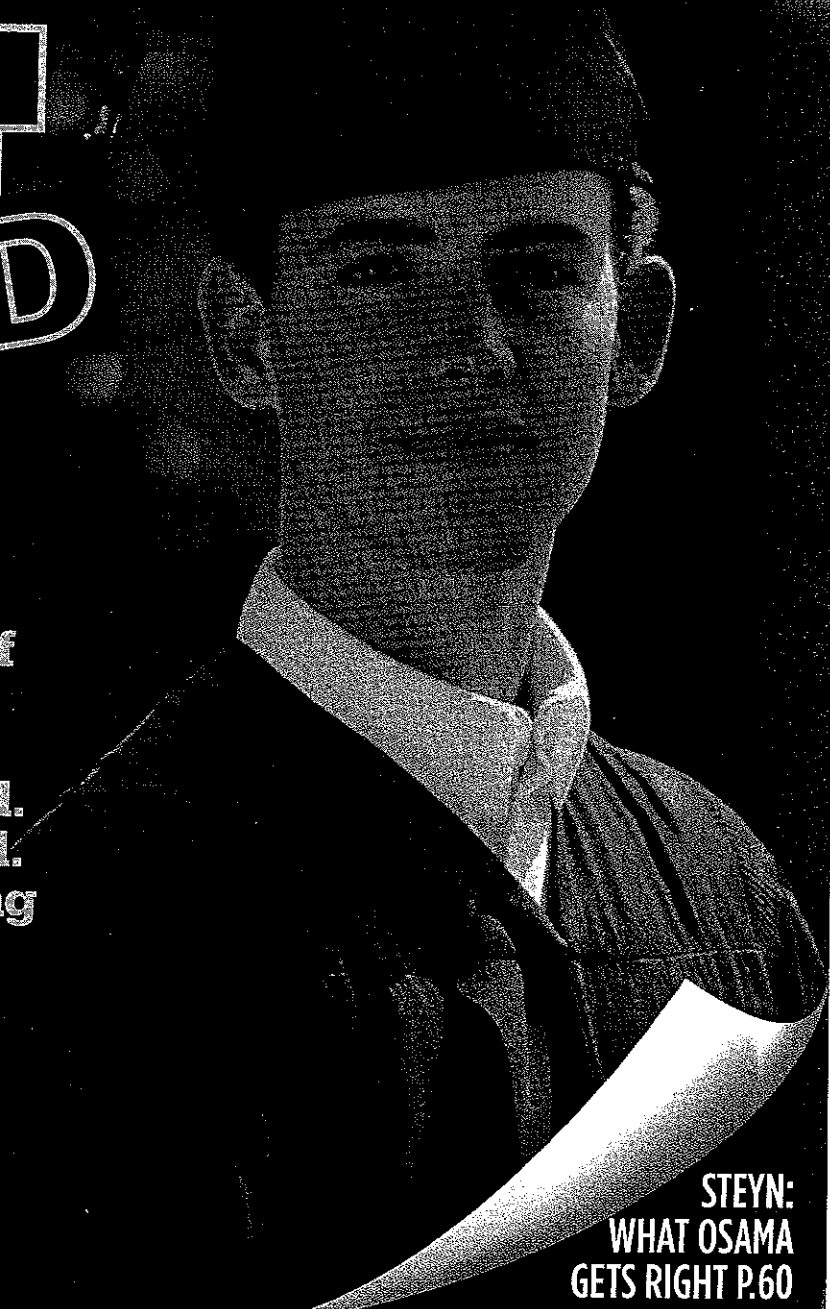
MACLEAN'S




FEB.
12th
2007

TTT FRAUD

**With more than half of
Canadian university
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all degrees are tainted.
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The great university cheating scandal

With more than 50 per cent of students cheating, university degrees are losing their value. Many are worried about long-term consequences. So why don't the schools put a stop to it? BY CATHY GULLI, NICHOLAS KÖHLER AND MARTIN PATRIQUIN

When General Motors realized last week that its Chevrolet Cobalt coupes lacked sufficient airbag padding, it recalled 98,000 cars. Hershey temporarily shut down an Ontario plant last November, recalling 25 types of candy because some may have been contaminated with salmonella. And when Sony found out its laptop batteries tended to overheat and catch fire, it recalled 9.6 million packs before launching a "global replacement program." It's common prac-

tice in the corporate world—standards must be met and guaranteed, or customers will lose faith in the product and the business will die. Less so in academia.

Universities are in the business of producing graduates—the doctors who will heal us, the engineers who will build our bridges and the CEOs who will generate our wealth. The degrees they confer are the university's certificate that a graduate has completed a required course of study, and that he or she has been tested and deemed suitable by appropriate authorities. Yet a recent University of Guelph study has discovered that

more than half the student body in Canada is cheating its way through school. And there is no recall. There is not even a great sense of urgency around the problem. The value of a degree is being debased, and there is mounting evidence that a lack of integrity in the university system will have a far-reaching effect on our economy in the years to come.

The numbers on academic misconduct at both Canadian and American post-secondary institutions are startling.

The Guelph report puts the percentage of Canadian students engaging in serious cheating on written work at 53 per cent. In the U.S., according to some studies, 70 per cent of students admit to cheating in one form or another. Universities, apparently not convinced that cheating has reached crisis proportions, offer little but token anti-plagiarism policies and ineffective ethics campaigns to assuage critics.

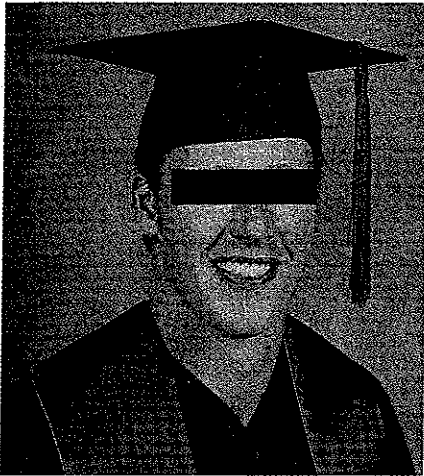
Professors, meanwhile, are not effective at policing their classrooms. In one U.S. survey, 44 per cent of profs said they had not reported a student caught cheating to officials during the three years prior to participating in the study.

When put into historical context, the numbers for academic integrity across North America show cheating is on a steady rise. The University of Guelph study, the first comprehensive investigation of cheating in Canadian institutions, was published last fall and found that 53 per cent of the undergraduates surveyed admitted to serious cheating on written work, including lifting passages from secondary sources or from the Internet without footnoting, and handing work completed by others in to instructors. According to numbers released to *Maclean's* by the University of Toronto, instances of plagiarism rose from 92 a decade ago to 298 in the 2003-2004 school year.

U.S. research conducted by Donald L. McCabe, a business professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey, comparing students in 1963 and 1993, shows the percentage of those admitting to copying from a classmate doubled to 52 per cent; those reporting having helped another student cheat jumped to 37 per cent from 23 per cent; and that the use of crib notes in test and exam settings

increased to over a quarter from 16 per cent.

The advent of the Internet has only accelerated the trend. While 10 per cent of U.S. students surveyed in 1999 confessed to yanking whole passages from the Web to write their papers, almost 40 per cent admitted to the practice six years later, according to McCabe's research. Other Web-based services include the so-called "paper mills" hawking custom-made essays by ghostwriters with proven records for scoring high grades. The numbers attached to instances of Internet-related cheating—and indeed to cheating of all kinds—are likely under-reported. "What could be happening now is that it's becoming so commonplace among students that it's not cheating now—it's just a way to survive the



system," says McCabe, who is also founding president of Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity, which promotes ethics among students and faculty. "Stealing a glance at a test, a little bit of plagiarism—it's just not on people's radar screens anymore."

Though cheating is rife in all fields of academic study, the highest numbers crop up in the scariest places. A survey of 5,300 U.S. graduate students published late last year by the Academy of Management Learning and Education, for example, found that business students, at 56 per cent, were the worst offenders—no comfort to prosecutors in the aftermaths of recent corporate corruption scandals. Engineering students, meanwhile, are, at 54 per cent, close behind those business students. Both groups admitted to activities ranging from plagiarism to smuggling crib notes into exams. Perhaps most shocking, some two dozen dental students at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey were last summer told to perform a year of community service after falsifying credits for clinical procedures such as root canals and cavity fillings—procedures patients would no doubt prefer their dentists had down cold. Such cases are not unique to the U.S. Over two dozen first-year University of

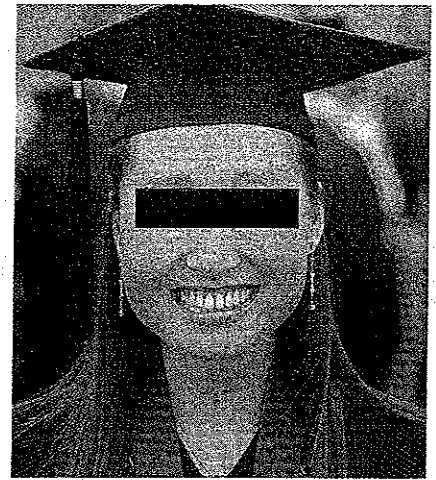
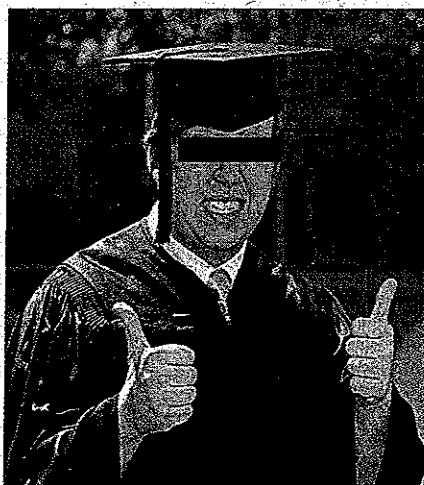
Toronto law students were caught in 2001 fixing their grades on summer job applications in a bid to secure better jobs.

Though the more sanguine among us might argue that cheating has always been a part of university life, and that misconduct at university does not necessarily lead to misconduct later on, studies suggest that unethical students become misbehaving employees. "Cheating is the result of the desire to get ahead while taking shortcuts," says Deborah Eerkes, director of the student judicial affairs office at the University of Alberta. "That's what students are doing in classes if they're cheating or plagiarizing—they're trying to get the good grades without actually putting in the effort. And I think that underlying cause is what follows them."

A 2005 *New England Journal of Medicine* paper suggests, for example, that doctors disciplined by state medical boards are three times more likely to have been singled out for unprofessional behaviour while at medical school. "The evidence is in," read an editorial published alongside the article, "and the link between unprofessional behaviour in medical students and their subsequent unprofessional behaviour as physicians is undeniable." Medical school students are not alone. A 2001 study of attitudes among business students published in the *Journal of Education for Business* found that those "who engage in dishonest behaviour in their college classes were more likely to engage in dishonest behaviour on the job."

Though "we don't have that great survey that says, if you cheat in college, you're going to be the next Ken Lay [the former Enron

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, INSTANCES OF PLAGIARISM ROSE FROM JUST 92 A DECADE AGO TO 298 IN THE 2003-2004 SCHOOL YEAR



CEO]," says Tim Dodd, executive director of Duke's Centre for Academic Integrity, the potential consequences are clear. There is a cost to employers associated with hiring graduates whose university experiences have habituated them to cheating; it is the cost of incompetence. Writes Randi Sims, an authority in business ethics at Florida's Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship: "If some graduates are competing from professional positions based upon dishonestly earned academic credentials, employers may suffer."

There is arguably no institution better positioned in today's knowledge-based society to shape the minds of young people than the university. "The integrity of almost every major public institution has come under question in the last several years—whether it's the police force, the government, the church, whatever," says Julia Christensen Hughes, the Guelph professor who co-wrote the Canadian cheating study with McCabe. "Universities have to be beyond reproach. The credibility of the research that we generate, the credibil-

ity of the students who we graduate, has to be beyond questions." And yet they are not.

On the face of it, at least, universities denounce academic misconduct and boast of policies that permit professors to ferret out and prosecute cheaters. In practice, students who cheat are unlikely to be caught and face few penalties when they are. Christensen Hughes, who is also director of Guelph's Teaching Support Services, has heard it all—including stories of young women heading into end-of-term exams with crib notes scrawled on their upper thighs so they can hike up their skirts to expose historical dates, mathematical formulas and quotes from Shakespeare. She sees the problem as something deeper. "I think it's reflective of a broader

53% of all students admit to serious cheating in written work

societal attitude in which character and integrity just don't seem to matter as much as those characteristics did at one time."

"If the worst that's going to happen to them is they're going to get docked some marks," she adds, "from a student's cost-benefit perspective, we've got to change that metric." Many Canadian universities do not have a formalized way of detecting cheating in test settings, for example, where easy-to-manipulate multiple-choice exams have, in the age of the 300-student classroom, become ubiquitous—particularly in first- and second-year courses. Most policies governing the prosecution of plagiarists remain arbitrary and at the discretion of professors. And while professors at most institutions are encouraged to implement anti-cheating measures, they are frequently not mandatory.

The University of Toronto depends on a patchwork of exam standards and norms that varies from discipline to discipline. "Some departments do use several versions of tests when administering exams for large numbers of students," says Pam Gravestock, the university's associate director of the teaching advancement office. Alberta's University of Lethbridge, meanwhile, doesn't have an exam monitoring policy as formal as those used by some larger schools. "The use of randomized multiple-choice exams is fairly common but not mandated," says vice-president academic, Séamus O'Shea. "I think most students are ethical, but there is no doubt that some are unaware of what plagiarism is, especially in the first and second years." Penalties for both test cheating and plagiarism at Lethbridge range from the proverbial slap on the wrist to a failing grade to outright expulsion. "If you're caught twice," he says, "that's grounds for a vacation—perhaps even a permanent one."

Incoming University of British Columbia students, meanwhile, sign a contract binding them to the university's "statutes, rules and

regulations, and ordinances" under penalty of a failing grade and, on occasion, suspension. Paul G. Harrison, associate dean of science at UBC and a botany professor, says most instances of cheating involve multiple-choice questions, where, he says "a student looks at another student's exam paper and copies what they can see or think they see." Students entering an exam room are bound by the same university contract that restricts, among other things, "the use of any devices, including calculators, computers, sound or image players/recorders/transmitters (including telephones) other than those authorized by the examiners." Banning such devices is now fairly standard at Canadian universities.

The students, perhaps not surprisingly, are hardly lining up to tackle the problem. Next week, Dalhousie University in Halifax kicks off "Academic Integrity Week," aimed at promoting the intricacies of proper footnoting and attribution. Dalhousie administrators admit the bone-dry material is a hard sell. "The sign-up isn't going very well," says Lynn Taylor, head of Dal's Centre for Learning and Teaching. "If we get 30 people [in a workshop] we'd be excited."

Of all Canadian universities, perhaps McGill's policies are the most stringent. It instituted mandatory assigned or scrambled seating and differing test versions for all their final exams in 1990, largely to curb cheating on multiple-choice questions. All final-year multiple-choice exams are subsequently run through McGill's Exam Security Program, which analyzes wrong answers for tell-tale similarities. "The more identical wrong answers two or more exams have, the more it

becomes suspect," says David Harpp, a McGill chemistry professor who helped pioneer the program. "McGill is actually being quite conservative in its parameters. We could probably catch more cheats, but we are only catching the real idiots." Despite the success of Harpp's method, he knows of no other university in Canada that has adopted it.

McGill has used *turnitin.com*, a Web-based essay authentication database effective in identifying cases of plagiarism, since 2004. Though use of such databases is widespread at Canadian universities, only McGill has written it into its policy. If suspected of cheating, a student must either have the paper checked against the database or choose another means of authentication, as some student groups had copyright-related complaints about the database. Smaller class sizes, where students have been shown to cheat less, as well as boned-up exam monitoring, are McGill's priorities. "The point isn't to catch people," says Morton Mendelson, deputy provost at McGill. "The point is to convince them that they'll be caught if they cheat."

Whatever the policies implemented by universities, cheating is still rampant and getting worse. It would be easy to blame students for their transgressions. Yet it is the universities—the institutions issuing the degrees and guaranteeing educational quality—that must find solutions.

SOME YOUNG WOMEN HIKE UP THEIR SKIRTS BEFORE EXAMS TO SCRAWL DATES, MATH FORMULAS AND SHAKESPEARE QUOTES ON THEIR UPPER THIGHS



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW TOLSON; DAVID BUFFINGTON/BLEND IMAGES/CORBIS

Perhaps professors, charged with monitoring their students, don't make good cops. While instructors are "required to report academic dishonesty," says Christensen Hughes, "some don't." That may understate the problem. While the Guelph study notes that 75 per cent of professors and 80 per cent of teaching assistants thought a student had cheated in the previous year—almost half were absolutely sure of it—less than half said they believed that cheating is a serious problem. In a 2001 paper, U.S. business professors Sarah Nonis and Cathy Owens Swift cited research indicating that while "60 per cent of faculty members observed cheating in their classrooms... only 20 per cent of them actually met with the student and a higher authority." Says Nonis, who teaches marketing at Arkansas State University: "My gut feeling is that number might be even more now."

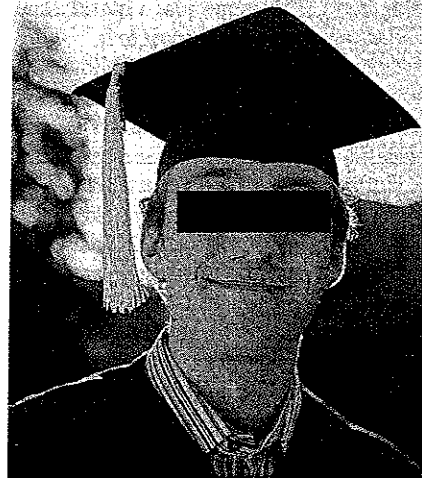
A myriad of anxieties deter professors and teaching assistants from seeking formal punishment. The halls of academe are overrun with stories of TAs, confronted with plagiarism, doling out low marks rather than alerting university authorities—the rigmarole is just too unpleasant, oppressive and time-consuming. Professors are "there to teach and to publish research, not to police," says Tina Kremmidas, assistant vice-president and senior economist at the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. "They're competing too to get tenure, their salaries depend on it. So they are under severe pressure themselves. And if they had to monitor every student in their class for plagiarism and cheating, that's extremely time-consuming."

More often than not, too, academic integrity policies produce "confusion" among both students and faculty, says Christensen Hughes. "Maybe policies exist but don't have the confidence of the people who are supposed to implement them," she says. "They'll make their own private deal with students or they can't be bothered to use that formal process." Such tacit collusion between students and teachers makes sense only in an environment where both camps harbour the perception that misconduct is endemic. "People in general think that everybody else is cheating, and that makes it okay for them to cheat too," says Kremmidas. "It's true of school, and it's true of the corporate world." The result is an uneven playing field—some classes fairer than others—a situation that in turn serves to reinforce the tendency among students to cheat in order to resolve that injustice.

Jack Mintz, a professor at the Rotman School of Management at the University of

Toronto, believes underfunding at universities may be a reason why some professors, feeling overwhelmed by the workload and administratively powerless, turn a blind eye. Some instructors believe detecting a cheat

DOCTORS DISCIPLINED BY STATE MEDICAL BOARDS ARE THREE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN SINGLED OUT AT MED SCHOOL FOR BAD BEHAVIOUR



reflects badly on them. "It could be that they worry about future endowments in some cases," says Mintz. "The point is that the universities have to create a tone at the top that goes right down that this is not going to be tolerated."

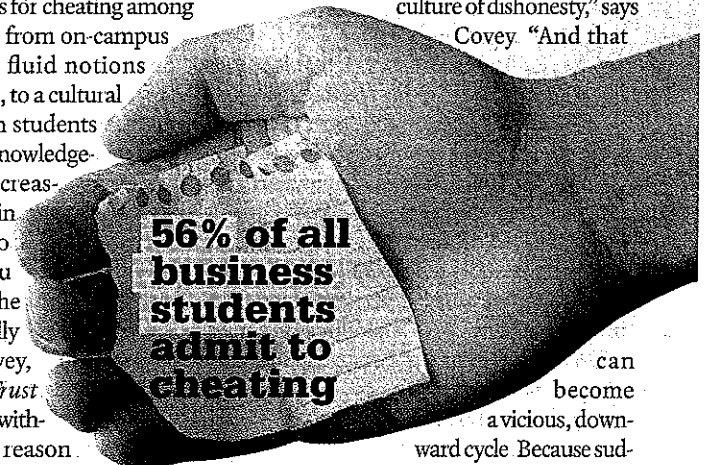
Experts say the reasons for cheating among today's students extend from on-campus competition, to more fluid notions around what is unethical, to a cultural generation gap between students and professors. "In this knowledge-worker age, it's now increasingly tied to doing well in school so you can get into better grad schools so you can get better jobs—so the pressure to do well is really high," says Stephen Covey, author of *The Speed of Trust*. "There's strong data that within companies the No. 1 reason for ethical violations is the pressure to meet expectations, sometimes unrealistic expectations." The same, he says, holds true for school. Over the last two decades, too, North American universities have seen their mandates shift from institutions of learning, remote from the more quotidian aims of finding work and putting food on the table, to the necessary condition for entry into the corporate world. "I think there's a lot of students these days who have bought

into the message that you come to university for a credential—to get a better job, to make more money," says Christensen Hughes. As Covey says, students "get the degree, not the education."

Some students who admit to misconduct often believe their professors are complicit in their cheating. Among engineering students, says Christensen Hughes, "there was a sense that they were expected to take more courses than other students, typically, so they felt justified—they needed to find shortcuts." She adds: "They also said that they assumed that faculty knew that. So in a sense they felt there was collusion or, 'Nudge-nudge, wink-wink, we all know what's going on, we all know what it takes to survive this program.'"

McCabe sees something else at work in the trend. "Younger people joining the workforce feel much more at ease making their own rules—deciding what rules they can ignore, what rules they should apply and what way they can apply them," he says. In a small but not insignificant number of the students surveyed, McCabe finds some who see cheating as a valuable skill in itself. "I'll have students who will say, 'I'm just acquiring a skill that will serve me well in the real world,'" says McCabe. "They see it as training in a sense—they're learning how to beat the system."

This, of course, is a breed of rationalization. Professors are not complicit and cheating is not a domain of study. "The more people rationalize cheating, the more it becomes a culture of dishonesty," says Covey. "And that



can become a vicious, downward cycle. Because suddenly, if everyone else is cheating, you feel a need to cheat too." Nothing demonstrates this better than the group of American business students who, presented with the idea that F grades would be accompanied by permanent black marks in their records if the failure was due to cheating, embraced the notion. "They wanted employers to know that they'd failed the course because they cheated and not because they were necessarily stupid," says Christensen Hughes.

Having cheated their way to degrees, these new grads will likely enter the workforce without the “skills and the knowledge base to do what they were hired to do,” warns Kremmidas, who says that employers will suffer the consequences: “This raises little red flags as to the productivity of the individual.” Tasks take longer to complete than they should because the new hire must figure out the assignment or be taught by colleagues and management, who have their own work to do. Employees who aren’t cut out for the job could also put their companies at risk of lawsuits launched by angry and injured customers or unsatisfied clients.

Faced with mounting pressure to do work they’re incapable of accomplishing, some new hires will resort to their former cheating ways, says Mintz: “There is a certain morality involved. If you’re going to cheat to get ahead in school, then it makes sense

economic consequence to that,” says Covey “Everything will take longer and cost more because now you’re validating, questioning, wondering, and you’re putting in place redundancies to check on people because you don’t trust them.”

Covey warns employers to think twice about giving cheating students the benefit of the doubt when looking for new recruits. “If companies are hiring people who are fundamentally not honest, but have rationalized their dishonesty and they’re cheating, then [companies] are going to be dealing with fraud. This is not just a moral issue. There’s an extraordinary cost to it.”

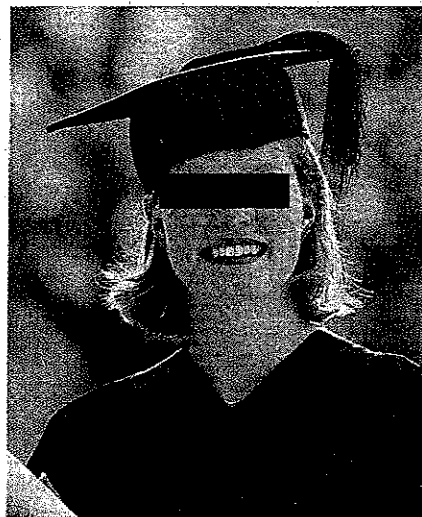
That cost is particularly troubling when applied to the majority of companies, which will suffer the same negative effects of workplace fraud. “When you start seeing that over half of students cheat, it’s a very big concern because that then starts sounding like it could have an impact on the overall productivity of the economy,” and not just on individual businesses, says Mintz. Productivity determines economic growth, adds Kremmidas, and losses would affect standards of living and employee wages.

Covey foresees more scandals like Enron and WorldCom as cheating becomes more acceptable to society. “We will see a crisis and a lack of integrity,” he says. And that will provoke more compliance laws such as Sarbanes Oxley in the U.S. and Bill 198 in Canada, both passed in the wake of corporate crimes, which companies must now follow to ensure their honesty in reporting financial information. “So the response is to try and legislate morality and integrity. And you become a rule-based society,” says Covey.

But even legislation can’t guarantee trust. “If the cheating is widespread, then all the laws won’t even stop people. And really you would see a collapse in society,” insists Covey, adding: “Trust is central to an economy that works.”

A lack of trust is a direct threat to society, argues Duke’s Tim Dodd. “We operate almost unconsciously in a world of assumed trust,” he says. “When I drive over a bridge, I don’t think about whether or not the engineer was properly credentialed or whether the inspector took a bribe. I trust it’s not going

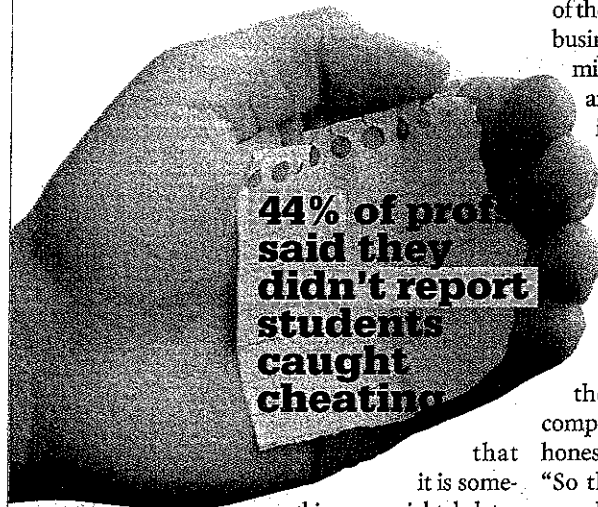
to collapse. I trust that when I walk under a chandelier hanging in a hotel ballroom in New York that [it was hung] according to specification by a person of competence and that the inspection was done by a person of



integrity. We couldn’t live as a species without that level of trust because we wouldn’t be able to put one foot in front of the other.”

Imagine putting one foot in front of the other and falling into an abyss. Bad bridge-building, like a bad education, compromises a public trust. Certainly universities owe a duty to the companies that rely on their product—the graduates who arrive each year as interns and articling students. “This raises an interesting question: should employers start thinking of suing universities, if they can prove this, for producing a student who actually cheated his way through university?” asks Mintz. “I think there actually may be a case for that.”

But what of the university’s responsibility to the public? “Professionals are expected to be in positions of trust,” says Len Brooks, a professor at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management. “They have expertise that people who rely upon them do not. The professional is expected to demonstrate fiduciary responsibility—fiduciary duty—toward the client or public.” Universities—home to the teachers who produce our healers, our bridge-builders and the CEOs who generate our wealth—are failing to demonstrate that responsibility by permitting widespread cheating among students. And we will all pay. **M**



that it is something you might do later on.” According to a 2006 report on workplace abuses by the American Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, employee cheating costs companies a median of US\$159,000 a year, and the most common infractions at small businesses include writing fake cheques, “skimming” revenues and processing false invoices. Fraud cost Canadian companies US\$65 billion last year, Kremmidas extrapolates from the report.

Employers who fire a cheating worker incur more expenses: replacing a mid-level employee costs a company US\$10,000, and US\$40,000 to hire a new senior executive, according to estimates by the trade publication *Recruiting Times*. But keeping that cheating employee on staff can cost a company even more. Thirty per cent of all business failures are due to employee theft, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. The risk of going bankrupt because of cheating employees is enough to break trust between staff and management. “And there’s an eco-



WONDER HOW HE MIXES THE PAINT?

An art teacher, who was fired after an online video surfaced that showed him painting with his private parts, has been offered legal help by the American Civil Liberties Union. Stephen Murmer, who taught at a high school outside of Richmond, Va., sells his unusual paintings for more than US\$900. But the school board wasn’t impressed, saying that the artist’s extracurricular endeavours caused too much of a stir.