**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.

Harvard adopted an honor code on May 6, 2014. In May 2017, Harvard announced that more than 60 students enrolled in Computer Science 50 (CS50): Introduction to Computer Science I appeared before the College's Honor Council investigating cases of academic dishonesty. While the facts have been kept confidential so far, a statement on the course website establishes standards for behavior: "The course recognizes that interactions with classmates and others can facilitate mastery of the course's material, [but] there remains a line between enlisting the help of another and submitting the work of another." The site provides some guidance: Acts of collaboration that are reasonable include sharing a few lines of code. Acts not reasonable include soliciting solutions to homework problems online. CS50 introduced a "regret clause," allowing students who commit "unreasonable" acts to face only course-specific penalties [not institutional] if they report the violation within 72 hours.

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 May 2012 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. **Evaluate the ethics of the "regret clause" established for CS50 from deontological and teleological points of view.**

The deontological genre of ethics refers to the duties an individual has to others. In relation to the Harvard Cheating Scandal, students have duties to their university, professors, and other students to follow their Student Honor Code. In other words, the university, professors, and other students have the right to expect all students will follow that code. This particular regret’s clause in effect reduces the potential magnitude of punishment for failure of a particular student who chooses not to follow the honor code and subsequently regrets that act and self-reports it within 72 hours of the act.

It is unclear from the facts of the case as to the motivation by the professors of CS50 to modify the code. Perhaps they thought that a student who initially breached the code might subsequently come to regret their action and be more inclined to turn themselves in if the magnitude of the potential punishment were less. Unfortunately, from a deontological perspective, the “regrets clause” is inappropriate and unethical as it provides an exception for certain students (those taking CS50). Under Emanuel Kant’s categorical imperative a maxim is a universal rule which can be applied to all people. Deontological ethics are termed means-based ethics (follow the rule and you are being ethical – it does consider the consequences of the act). If following the Honor Code is viewed as moral absolute that all students must follow, providing exceptions to that code for specific students appears to be problematic.

While deontological ethics is means-based, the teleological genre of ethics is considered to be consequence based. Under the theory of utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham), the most ethical action is the solution that results in greatest good to the greatest number of people. Therefore, when we look at the ‘regrets clause’ from a teleological perspective we find that it might initially appear to benefit more people (that is if we restrict our view to the potential punishment of the CS50 students and professors). However, focusing in on the benefits to just the CSD students and professors is only one-way of framing the issue. The ‘regret clause’ (exception to the honor code) given to CS50 students may be viewed by the rest of the student body as unfair and hurtful. It implies that cheating outside of CS50 is worse than cheating in CS50. Therefore, this ‘regrets clause’ would be considered unethical from a teleological perspective as it appears to have the potential for doing more harm than good (not bringing the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people).

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>

**Multiple Choice Questions**

**1-1: Qu.04 Students who engaged in cheating...**

Students who engaged in cheating would have probably violated which of the following Six Pillars of Character more than the others?

**Trustworthiness**

Respect

Responsibility

Fairness

Trustworthiness involves honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty. The issue of cheating is much more entwined with these characteristics than respect, responsibility, or fairness. Was the student honest when promising to work alone even though students did not do this?

**1-1: Qu.05 Students who engage in cheating..**

Students who engage in cheating usually rationalize their behavior via what?

Ethical relativism

**Situation ethics**

Cultural values

Responsibility

Situation ethics recognizes the existence of normative principles but questions whether they should be applied as strict directives, instead the circumstances surrounding a dilemma can and should influence the decision-making process.

**1-1: Qu.06 We could best examine the...**

We could best examine the actions of the students in this case by examining student \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

ethics

morals

**norms and values**

laws

Ethical behavior is a moral philosophy. Morals involve standards (i.e., ethics are the operational side of morality). Ethics are prescriptive, not descriptive. Norms and values describe the way people act and is therefore the best answer.

**1-1: Qu.07 The students were most likely...**

The students were most likely operating under which moral philosophy?

Deontology or equal respect to all persons

Hobbes and Locke’s theories of rights

Rawls’ theory of justice

**A subset of teleology**

Egoism defines right or acceptable behavior in terms of its consequences for the individual. The cheating individuals were acting out of their own self-interest rather than equal respect, the rights of others, or justice.