**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. 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 typo- graphical 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 graded the exams—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.

The facts of this case are taken from Richard Perez- Peña,”Students Disciplined in Harvard Scandal,” February 1,2013, Available at [www.nytimes.com/2013/02/02/education/harvard-forced-dozens-to-leave-in-cheating-scandal.html?\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/02/education/harvard-forced-dozens-to-leave-in-cheating-scandal.html?_r=0).

Video Links:

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

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

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAK-FwyXK-E>

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

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

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 did not display those traits. The professor and teaching assistant did not seem to communicate clearly or possibly consistently to all students which may be seemed as lack of caring or fairness. The other stakeholders want fairness and responsibility from the other participants.

1. **Who is at fault for the cheating scandal? Is it the students, the teaching assistants, the professor, or the institution? Use the concepts of egoism and enlightened egoism 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.

1. **From a deontological perspective and the point of view of achieving justice, were anyone’s rights violated by the events of the scandal and outcome of the case? Explain why or why not.**

It seems some of the cheating students engaged in rationalizations for their behavior. We hear the test was confusing; collaboration was expected in other areas; and the teaching fellows promoted the idea through their involvement in helping to interpret the questions.

It seems that the students violated the rules in this case and should be held accountable for their actions. However, there were mitigating circumstances not the least of which was from the teaching assistants who seemed to work with those students who came forward asking for help to interpret information and develop responses to test questions. That then raises the question of fairness to those students who did not seek help.

Perhaps the lesson to be learned from the Harvard cheating scandal is we, in academe, need a new approach to evaluating the benefits and potential harms of collaboration. It can be a great teaching tool and mirrors collaborative effort in the workplace. Test questions in a collaborative environment can better assess analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills, two skills essential for success in today's workplace.

The level playing field argument is key in evaluating the use and purpose of student collaboration. Academic integrity is at stake. Collaborative effort may impair fairness in the grading process unless collaboration is expected of all students. Otherwise, those who “play by the rules” may receive lower grades because they worked individually while those who shared information may benefit from such an approach.