

Student cheating: challenge for professional ethics



by Jim Ridler, P.Eng.

The reputations of Canadian professional schools have to varying degrees been tarnished by the fraudulent actions of some of their students, as have the professions indirectly.

The first incident was headline news on and off for months in 2001. At the University of Toronto Law School, 30 first-year students were found to have inflated their first-term exam marks in their applications for summer jobs at Toronto law firms. Other students blew the whistle. After an investigation confirmed this dishonesty, the students were suspended for a year and had a related note attached to their transcripts until after their graduation, severely hampering their summer job prospects.

The students all admitted that what they had done was wrong. As well as trying to take advantage of their honest classmates, they had created a false document—a direct break with a professional lawyer's duty. These were not callow youths. Their average age was 24, but they thought that since the exams were for practice (no official transcript was

Whether for plagiarism or falsifying marks, university students in Canadian professional schools have been in the news for the wrong reasons over the past two years. Discipline has been necessary, but this author argues for proactive as well as reactive measures.

produced) and the marks they claimed were not to be verified, they could get away with cheating.

Of course there were mitigating circumstances. The law firms insisted the students provide the exam marks, to help it screen the large number of applicants, and was particularly aggressive about early recruitment, fearing competition from American firms. The students were given the impression that the summer jobs would be the first in a series, leading to articling and permanent jobs at high income levels. With recent tuition increases, the students also felt more than the usual pressure to get the summer

jobs. Also, although the faculty had voted against making the marks officially available, the school administration had apparently not objected to the law firms putting pressure on the students to provide the marks themselves.

Public perceptions of the law profession's honesty and integrity were hurt. Cartoonists had a field day at the expense of the cheating students, the school and the law profession. The incident cast a dark and broad pall in its wake.

Next came Simon Fraser's Business School, where early in 2002, 47 third-year students were found to have committed blatant group plagiarism on a statistics

paper. They were given a failing grade, with potential suspensions. The number of students involved in this incident alone was more than the usual number of instances of plagiarism in the whole university.

And finally, 29 third-year engineering students at Carleton University were caught and punished last summer for using plagiarized material in an essay for a professional practice course. It was the largest plagiarism case ever at the university. As a penalty, they were given a zero grade on the essay, in a mandatory course. As a result, 25 failed the course and several will probably not graduate with the rest of their class. The cheating students had lifted material from the Internet and had not identified it as someone else's work. Ironically, they were caught by teachers using increasingly popular Internet search engines to check content for unattributed sources.

Once caught, the Carleton students did admit they had been wrong not to attribute the material from the Internet—although the parameters for their Internet use might not have been clearly explained to them. Because the course material included engineering ethics, the media again gave the story a lot of negative attention.

Competitive edge

In each incident, a significant number of supposedly mature, professional school students cheated to get an unfair competitive edge on their peers, using an easy mechanism they felt was unlikely to be detected. Faced with the evidence, the students admitted that what they did was wrong.

The schools applied significant discipline, up to, but not including, expulsion. Somewhat mitigating circumstances were not used to avoid discipline. In two cases, the ethical mistakes related directly to the ethical practice of the professions the students were preparing to join.

Presumably, the penalties meted out have made clear to all current students in the particular professional schools that cheating is wrong, unprofessional and will produce serious negative consequences to those who get caught. Is that the end of these stories?

Failing the test

Let's use PEO's Code of Ethics (section 77 of Regulation 941) to test these incidents. Here are some relevant quotations:

- ◆ It is the duty of a practitioner to act with (a) fairness and loyalty to associates [i.e. fellow students] and employers and (b) devotion to high ideals of personal honour and professional integrity.
- ◆ A practitioner shall endeavour to enhance the public regard for the profession.
- ◆ A practitioner shall maintain the honour and integrity of the profession.

Clearly, the cheating incidents fail on every relevant provision from our ethics code.

The Carleton incident should raise a big red flag regarding these future applicants for a professional engineer's licence. But PEO may not discover which students were involved in the incident, since uni-

may appeal a decision of the Registration Committee to the Divisional Court (section 31).

Ethics education

The examples here make it all the more important that engineering schools are effective at educating students in professional ethics, so that such transgressions never occur.

In addition to supporting effective discipline by engineering schools, the profession should encourage the schools to place as high a priority on teaching engineering ethics as on teaching technical fundamentals—and to introduce the subject from the beginning of a student's professional education instead of toward the end. Our engineering schools should have as a mission to produce ethically aware and capable graduates, engaged and willing to take on professional ethics issues. And the criteria for accrediting engineering programs as meeting the academic standards for licensing should give

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versities do not routinely identify offenders because of privacy considerations.

If the cheating should be found out during the licensing process, the *Professional Engineers Act* allows the registrar to refuse to issue a licence on the grounds that the applicant's past conduct affords grounds for the belief that the applicant would not practise professional engineering in accordance with the law and with honesty and integrity (section 18 of the Act). The applicant is entitled under the Act to appeal a refusal to PEO's Registration Committee, which can direct the registrar to issue the licence, direct the registrar to refuse to issue the licence, exempt the applicant from any of the requirements of the Act or regulation, or direct the registrar to issue the licence subject to any conditions it specifies (section 19). Either PEO or the applicant

the necessary weight to inculcating in students the ethics and values of the profession to ensure that they adopt this mission. Discipline is necessary, but not enough. The recent spate of professional school cheats shows that ethics education and the resultant positive motivation are also needed to consistently produce graduates the profession will be proud to license. ◆

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