Meaningless Grades and a New Dishonesty

William C. Dowling

Whenever I read about another episode of college cheating, I think of a scene in *Rounders,* a movie about two high-stakes poker buddies who have known each other since high school. One is a character played by Matt Damon. He's a poker genius, someone who calculates odds with lightning precision and makes precise inferences from the betting. The other, played by Ed Norton, is a shady character who's just finished a prison term. He's also a superb poker player. But his specialty is systematic cheating, dealing surreptitious winners—"hangers," in poker slang: cards dealt from the middle or bottom of the deck—to himself or his partner.

Norton's crooked dealing allows them to clean out a bunch of rich kids in a college game. The two buddies then locate a weekly high-stakes game played by off-duty state cops. The cops, unlike the college kids, aren't suckers. Norton is caught dealing a hanger, and a moment later the camera shows him and Damon out in the parking lot, bloody and bruised from the beating they've just been given by the other poker players.

There are, it seems to me, two levels to this scene. The first is the obvious one: a weekly poker session is what is called a zero-sum game. If you and I have both put our stakes into the pot, your cheating means that you are, in effect, stealing from me. It's a situation in which everyone has a personal stake in seeing that everyone else stays honest.

The second is less obvious. At a certain deep level of social consciousness, there's an almost intuitive sense that cheating threatens the whole set of relations that allow groups to function. Children know this instinctively. They react loudly against other children who cheat at games.

This is where the parking-lot scene in *Rounders* tells us something about college cheating. It's essential that Norton was caught red-handed in a private game, one in which everyone had a stake in seeing everyone else obeyed the rules. This is a situation in which everyone perceives, as though by moral instinct, why cheating is always an ugly practice. When you change this essential element, everything else changes too.

In the days when university grades were given out as an honest measure of academic and intellectual performance, cheating on exams or papers was a

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lot like the poker game in *Rounders,* a situation in which everyone was immediately aware that people who cheated were mocking or disvaluing the achievement of those who were acting honestly.

Today, all this has changed. It's the cheaters who are in control of the moral climate in which exams are given and papers assigned, and students who act honorably are very nearly paralyzed by a diffidence or timorousness about calling public attention to what is going on.

A lot of the explanation of why this change has occurred, it seems to me, has to do with grade inflation, which by taking away all legitimate standards of actual performance has turned cheating into a matter of "beating the system." To understand how this works, consider, as a contrast with the private poker game in *Rounders,* the practice of card-counting in casino blackjack. In 1962, drawing on an analysis published by a group of statisticians, Edward O. Thorp published his famous book *Beat the Dealer,* teaching people a way to beat the odds in a Las Vegas casino. (As the game proceeds, a player who has memorized which cards have been played knows by inverse inference what cards remain in the deck—a deck rich in 10's and Aces shifts the odds dramatically in favor of the player, a deck with lots of 5's and 6's shifts them in favor of the house.)

The casinos have gone to great lengths to deal with card-counters. Dealers use multiple decks. Known card counters are banned from the casinos, their pictures kept on file by security personnel. In return, some card counters are suing, claiming that, since they're not doing anything technically illegal, such banning is unjust.

While the courts are deciding the issue, card counting has a feature that can tell the rest of us something important about college cheating. In the period directly after Thorp published *Beat the Dealer,* many card counters went to casinos along with friends who knew they were using the card-counting system. These friends, who had not taught themselves card-counting methods, usually stood beside the card-counters, playing blackjack in the regular way. But none felt cheated when the card-counter won large sums of money by beating the odds. If anything, they felt admiration: the card counter hadn't taken anything away from them—he'd only "beaten the house," put one over on an impersonal system that was, in a sense, the opponent of every player in the casino.

It's the notion of "beating the system," one suspects, that accounts not only for the widespread cheating that goes on in colleges and universities today, but also the demoralization of the honest students who might otherwise be counted on to resent the way the dishonesty of their peers insults their own attempts to learn by study and hard work. And it's grade inflation that has brought about the climate in which cheating is perceived as beating the system.

In writing about higher education, the rise in grade inflation and the rise in college cheating are usually treated as separate phenomena. Cheating, in fact,

is usually thought to be a problem mainly at lower-level institutions, where either public pressure for "democratic" education or the urgent need of smaller private colleges to keep their enrollments up brings in large numbers of students unable to do college-level work.

Grade inflation, on the other hand, is thought to be the special problem of the most selective colleges and universities: it's at Williams and Harvard and Yale, whose entering classes are filled with students who have never seen a grade lower than A in their lives, that the pressure is supposed to be greatest. When Harvard announced last year that more than half of its undergraduates were getting either an A or an A- in their courses, nobody was surprised to hear that such "good" students were getting such high grades.

Yet a survey taken by one of my Rutgers students as research for an article she's writing for a campus publication reveals a quite different story. With one of the most talented student pools in the nation, New Jersey has a very high number of students who go off to the Ivies or good liberal arts colleges like Williams and Amherst. What the survey revealed in case after case—and with evidence that was not merely anecdotal, but could be independently checked—is that many of these New Jersey high school students had cheated their way into the most selective colleges in the country.

That's surprising enough, but not, perhaps, astonishing. What's astonishing is the frequency with which cheaters boasted openly about what they'd done to their high school classmates. In one interview I read, a student talks about an A paper she'd written for an AP History course. The following semester a classmate, another AP student taking the same course from another teacher, asked to see the paper, "to help her think about the topic." She must have found it helpful: she plagiarized the paper, word for word, and when it came back with an A, showed it to its author with a conspiratorial air, as though they'd been partners in getting away with something. (The plagiarist is today attending Harvard.)

It's the brazenness of the cheater's behavior, it seems to me, that reveals the hidden relation between grade inflation and widespread cheating. In a world where students are given A's for the most token effort, and where teachers have stopped trying to swim against the tide and give A's just to avoid trouble, one student's cheating doesn't take anything away from another student's grade. Like the card counter in blackjack, the cheater is, after all, just beating an impersonal system.

In a world where A's are reserved for the top few students in any class, on the other hand, where B+ and B are reserved for those whose work is genuinely above average, and where those whose work is average for that particular group—whether it's at Harvard or the local community college—receive C+ or C, the general attitude of students toward cheating is more likely to be like that of the cops in *Rounders:* to cheat is to take away from others credit they've honestly earned through talent and hard work.

In the days when I myself was trying to hold out against grade inflation, I'd give a little talk at the beginning of the course about why inflated grades hurt everyone, teachers and students and higher learning as a total enterprise. I'd begin by putting a certain sentence on the board and asking the class what was wrong with it. The sentence was this:

> Every student in this room is taller than
> the height of the average student in this room.

"What," I would ask, "is wrong with that sentence?" Some would look a bit puzzled, but most would get the point instantly: "It's a contradiction in terms," "Whoever wrote that doesn't know what 'average' means," "Everybody can't be taller than everybody else." Then I'd ask, with as much outward innocence as I could muster, "But what if it were a really tall group. What if it were an NBA team, with everybody at least 6–feet–5–inches tall?" And the students would get impatient: "That doesn't change anything—it's the average we're supposed to be talking about." Then, looking resigned, as though I didn't quite grasp their point but felt myself to have been shouted down by their collective sense of logical outrage, I'd put another sentence on the board:

> Every student in the course
> got an A for the course.

"Now," I'd say, with an air of spurious puzzlement. "Is there anything wrong with that sentence?" And this time, invariably, I would get blankness. Not assumed blankness, or embarrassed blankness, or nervous blankness, but genuine incomprehension. Even the brightest students in the class would honestly not see that there was any contradiction here, or that the second sentence was logically analogous to the first. It was then that I realized that grade inflation represents not simply a local problem in American higher education, but an Alice-in-Wonderland irreality that has all of us, students and professors and administrators, under its spell.

It wasn't until my student began working on her survey of cheating at Rutgers, though, that I began to understand the deeper sense in which grade inflation promotes cheating. This is where what I called the second level of the *Rounders* episode comes into play. In the first instance, I grant, pure self-interest is what's likely to make students intolerant of cheating in any situation where grades reflect actual performance. If your cheating directly harms my chances of getting into medical school or law school or one of the top philosophy programs in the country, I'm much more likely to tell you to stop.

Still, there's another way of looking at the matter. If I catch you plagiarizing your work from the web or getting high grades for papers written by custom-term-paper outfits, I might simply want to tell a professor or a dean that I'm doing my own work, and I want to be measured only against other students who have done theirs.

If you look closely, you'll see that this response is only incidentally an example of what might be called zero-sum outrage, where I'm angry because your gain equals my loss. Instead, it's much closer to the reaction that takes us to the second or "ethical" level of the *Rounders* example. At this level, what makes one angry is a deeper sense that cheating dishonors the very pursuit in which some people are trying their best, working as hard as they can, and taking the objective measure of their performance—whether it's a C+ in a calculus course or a 3:18 time in a marathon—as a true assessment of their accomplishment.

Perhaps the worst consequence of grade inflation, in other words, is that it hides or masks the ethical dimension of cheating, even from the honest student sitting next to the cheater. That dimension is central to anything we might want to think of as a genuine intellectual community. I thought of this recently when, in quite another context, I was reading Anthony Kenny's *A Life in Oxford*. Kenny, as many readers will know, is an Oxford philosopher who began his career as an ordained Catholic priest. His gradual estrangement from Catholicism is recounted in *A Path from Rome,* to which *A Life in Oxford* is an autobiographical sequel.

The moment that caught my attention was this. After he has applied for and achieved laicization, married, and taken up a position at Oxford, Kenny—by now an agnostic—continues to attend Catholic Mass. But he does so as a non-Catholic, always careful to limit his participation in the liturgy to those portions that do not imply either religious belief or membership in the Church. His reasoning seems to me exactly appropriate to the subject of grade inflation and cheating: "to recite the Creed or receive Communion would be, in my view, not only a sacrifice of integrity on the part of the unbeliever but also an insult to the seriousness with which these actions are undertaken by believers."

There we have, in a nutshell, a logic that brings to light the real moral ugliness of academic cheating. To cheat on an exam or plagiarize a paper is not simply to try to receive credit for work that is beyond one's own capacity. It is to insult the seriousness with which students who act honorably are taking their university education as a process of personal and intellectual development. In the same way, the dean or "Office of Student Services" who treats cheating as a mere slip or trivial inadvertency is telling every real student on the campus—the students whom any university worthy of the name ought most to value, encourage, even cherish—that he or she is valueless, nothing more than another anonymous unit on the endless and indiscriminate assembly line that, at very many schools, passes today as higher education.

It's only when everyone is operating within a system that reliably reports back to them the level of their actual achievement that one perceives the true moral degradation involved in cheating. It's only then that the marathoner who has undergone ten months of arduous training will have no hesitation

about telling the race officials that the person who finished ahead of him cut through the woods, or that a student who's put an enormous amount of time into getting an honorable C+ in calculus will get up and tell a classmate copying answers from a friend on the midterm to knock it off.

It's easy enough to see that the cops who beat up the card cheats in *Rounders* were at some level motivated by self-interest. It's harder to see that, beyond that, they were instinctively acting to preserve a certain rudimentary moral contract implicit even in weekend card games. It's not unreasonable, I think, to ask that university administrators, by putting an end to grade inflation, do what they can to raise the ethical level of their institutions at least to the level of ordinary folks who get together to play a game of poker on Saturday night.

The remark by a University of Virginia Medical Center employee in a staff meeting, quoted approximately below, was enough to prompt the university's president to issue a strongly worded press release, to impel the medical center CEO to investigate the incident for racial insensitivity, to incite a hasty "Protest against Racism at U. Va and the U. Va. Medical Center after a Recent Racial Incident" by the staff union, to result in "follow-up" measures for the employee, and it was grounds for the chairman of the NAACP to declare, "My first impulse is that this should be a dismissible infraction.":

I can't believe in this day and age that there's a sports team in our nation's capital named the Redskins. That is as derogatory to Indians as having a team called [the "N-Word"] would be to blacks.