

The essay service scandal

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

The arrival of spring each year coincides with the arrival of deadlines, and though most students will somehow struggle through the pile of essays and assignments which gather ominously before examinations, some have perhaps left things too long, and left themselves with some difficult decisions. One of the things which complicates such matters is the relatively new and unwelcome arrival of the essay service, whose soft sell advertisements in recent years have become as regular and, seemingly, as inevitable as the seasons themselves.

Posing as "tutoring," or (most often) "research" establishments, essay services can literally sell students a passing grade. The University's line on the issue is simple. The buying of essays is plagiarism, and is subject to the severest academic penalties for students unfortunate enough to be caught "in the act," penalties which include a failing grade in the course, and the possibility of expulsion from the program and the University itself.

"I regard what essay mills and essay services do as reprehensible," says York University Provost Tom Meininger, adding that steps have been taken to ensure that access to on-campus advertising (chiefly on-campus bulletin boards) is made especially difficult for people pushing services of this nature.

"On-campus advertising is checked as a matter of routine now by the Office of Student Affairs," says Meininger. "Periodically I will send a very stern letter (to the essay service) informing them of the university's disdain for such activities, and pledging to use all of the power available to us against their activities."

In the past, the exercise of that "power" has for the most part manifested itself in threats, though in October 1983 a bill for \$200 (clean up costs) was levelled by former Vice President (Student Affairs) John Becker against Quality Research and Term Papers of Scarborough, who posted unauthorized advertisements on campus, in the form of adhesive backed stickers. Advertisement for more legitimate services, such as tutoring or proofreading, are also checked regularly for accuracy. According to Meininger, many essay writing services have taken to disguising themselves as legitimate operations, and ads for tutoring help are often "dodges for people selling essays."

The service which *Excalibur* contacted, a short-lived outfit operating from Yonge and Bloor, proves Meininger's point. "You write the essay," their advertisement reads, "we will help you research and organize your material." "Researching," (at \$9 per 250 word, typewritten page) involves a complete set of notes on the essay topic, organized with a thesis, and with the 'key words' highlighted for the student. For \$11 per page (or more, given time constraints) the same service "would even write the paper for you," a representative of the company said, while pointing out that the usual file of finished essays were "available for reference" to a paying customer.

Lawrence Chanin, a free-lance editor and writer who operates a legitimate tutoring service from his home admits that the essay services are "good for business," even though he "obviously disagrees" with their methods. "People come to me expecting me to sell them an essay," says Chanin, who manages to persuade a lot of them to do the essays themselves, with his guidance.

"Most of what I do is copy editing

and proofreading. I also do some tutoring, sitting down with students, helping them with outlines and organization, and sometimes with difficult source material." Another obvious difference in Chanin's service is the price, which starts at \$2 per page, as opposed to essay services, which range upwards of \$15 per page, depending on the type of essay.

According to York sociology TA Allan Menzies, there are two kinds of bought essays: essays which are "tailor-made for the course," and the cheaper, "ready-made" variety, which he says are easy for instructors to spot. "There's a style to them," says Menzies, "they use the same typewriting style, the same title page and bibliographic formats, and they are often very repetitious." According to Menzies, students have been known to chip in together, submitting the same essay to different TAs. "I've confronted them, I've caught quite a few," he says. "If you have four or five people in a course going to the same essay service for essays on similar topics, there are bound to be similarities between the papers they turn in. In those cases it's quite easy to detect. Even with the success Menzies feels he has had in detecting the "ready-made" variety of essay service essays, he confesses to having difficulty with those "tailor-made" for a particular course.

"One of the things that bothers me most about these people is that they feed off social inequalities," says Menzies. "Students who are the most privileged, that is, they can afford to go out and spend \$150 on a paper, can virtually assure themselves of an A." Essays which cost this much are "generally very good," says Menzies, and "really the only way of knowing for sure (that the essay was bought) is if it is turned in by a student who you know is incapable of that kind of work."

At least one York graduate seems to have been impressed enough by this kind of essay to set up an essay writing business of his own, first in Toronto, and then abroad, in London, England. The March 9 edition of *The London Sunday Times* carried a story on London Essay Services (LES) established by York economics graduate John Sinclair-Whiteley, which sells essays "written by teachers, writers, and academics," to anybody willing to pay £8 per page. LES seemingly is trying to be the *creme de la creme* of the essay writing world, not only employing academics and teachers, but promising essays which are "well-written, thoroughly researched, and customized to fit the needs of each student." While Provost Tom Meininger doubts (along with others) that there is any specific connection between Sinclair-Whiteley's activities and essay services encountered at York, he did say that "British academic circles and higher education are taking the matter very seriously, and are outraged by it."

Although he has not personally encountered problems with bought essays, York English professor Don Summerhayes is well aware of the ever-present issue of plagiarism. "It's not something new, it has always gone on," he says. "I don't think there is a single fraternity in this country which does not have a file of essays available for its members use. The only thing different about these people is that they're making a business out of it." Summerhayes rejects the suggestion that poorer essay writing skills among students is responsible for this kind of plagiarism. "It's just the fact that these things (essay services) exist *at all*, and that students know about them." Still, he doesn't hold the students who use these services as wholly to blame. Many students who use essay services "are desperate," Summerhayes says, "and in some cases they are desperate because they have been given assignments which are totally unrealistic." "There is no way a student, with

his level of research skills, can avoid using blocks of information without reference if he is assigned a 30 to 40 page research paper in first year." In such instances, Summerhayes suggests that instructors "are inadvertently promoting plagiarism rather than discouraging it." He also expressed concern about complaints he has received from students who are enrolled in other courses, courses with instructors who they say have not returned a single test or essay result until the end of January. If this is the case Summerhayes says the course instructors are again "promoting" the type of panic which leads to plagiarism and bought essays.

Merlin Homer, a counsellor at York's Writing Workshop and the former director of York's English as a Second Language program offers a different view. Homer is quick to point out the difference between people who buy an essay and the kind of compulsive plagiarist she periodically comes in contact with. "Plagiarism is an issue with many of the students who come into the writing workshop," she says, adding that most of the problems are solved by handing the students a guidebook she has prepared on using sources. "Ninety percent of the students when they first come into the Writing Workshop just aren't aware how to properly use and footnote secondary sources. That leaves you with the ten percent who are 'hardcore' plagiarists."

"Hardcore plagiarists," according to Homer, are quite different from students who plagiarize by buying essays. "Most people who buy essays do it out of laziness." Compulsive plagiarists, she says, are quite the opposite. "The hardcore plagiarist is a person who absolutely refuses to believe in him or herself enough to hand in his or her own work." Homer's information comes from her experiences with several hardcore plagiarists, and from a case study she prepared last fall for a faculty development seminar, a case study she is "absolutely convinced" is representative of the problem common to all compulsive plagiarists.

Contrary to popular belief, Homer says, plagiarism is not simply a matter of copying someone else's words. "A negative self image is the chief factor," says Homer, "and the plagiarism itself intensifies that negative image—it becomes a cycle." This negative self-image manifests itself most often "in a desire to project an unreal image to others," and is the motivating force behind the plagiarizing of assignments. For the hardcore plagiarist, Homer says, the lack of research skills is not the problem. "I was surprised to find that these students generally know a great deal more about libraries and other resources than students doing their own work. And these people are putting *at least* as much time and effort into plagiarizing as it would take to produce an original assignment."

Homer adds that "it often turns out that these students have a facility with language" rather than a set of deficiencies. Plagiarists are generally mesmerized by the ability of others to express themselves through words. Often the plagiarist is lost in the material he is reading and doesn't realize that these aren't in fact his words that he is using. He may even choose material to plagiarize which reflects his own buried capabilities," says Homer.

According to Homer, compulsive plagiarism is like "an addiction," and like all habits it can be corrected (the subject of her case study was in fact a student who "kicked" the plagiarism habit), in this instance in the Writing Workshop. On the other hand, "the kind of people who like to buy essays are the same ones who (in the Workshop) want you to do all of the work for them," says Homer, adding that it has been her experience that essay buyers are far less

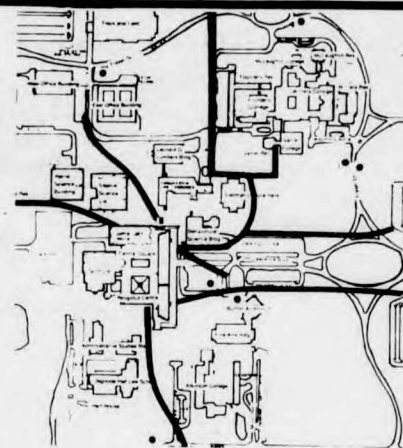
likely to use the Writing Workshop than individuals with genuine problems with plagiarism.

It is here where essay services do perhaps their worst damage. As the University faculty and administration try to keep pace with increasingly devious advertising campaigns

and the trend towards custom made essays, students, the real victims of these services, are succumbing to a new form of plagiarism. Students who buy essays are not only running the same risks as those who plagiarize in a less obvious manner, they are doing so with little hope of redeeming themselves at some future date. If this new brand of plagiarism is (as Homer suggests the old one to be), a symptom of some larger problem, then there is even more at stake in solving it than the academic futures of individual offenders.

Campus map for night use to appear at York

By JOEL GREEN



the more visible security is the more students will be encouraged to stay around and get involved."

Asked if she considered safety on the Keele Street campus a problem, Naomi Black, the Advisor to the President on the Status of Women said yes. "There's no way it's a safe campus; there's no way it can be" Black said, pointing out especially the problems of large open spaces and "the part of the city" the Keele campus is located in.

Director of Security and Safety Services Jack Santarelli, however, insisted that the Keele campus is safe.

"All our routes are safe" Santarelli said. "We're in great shape." Santarelli said that since his term as head of Security began in August 1984, there have been no attacks on women on campus.

A guide for night use of the Keele Street campus will be available this week through the office of the CYSF.

The brochure, a joint project by CYSF Internal Affairs Director Janet Bobeckko and Women's Affairs Director Elise Hallewick, contains a campus map with "safe" routes marked as well as other useful information, such as the closing times of all campus buildings and a list of safety tips, said Hallewick.

Bobeckko said that a recent \$22,000 project by the university to upgrade the lighting on campus has improved safety but that more money is needed.

"We need to spend at least another \$80-\$100,000," Bobeckko said. "The better lighting we have

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