

Students buy degrees

The commerce of plagiarism

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for Canadian University Press

Consider the scenario: It's late March and you're in your final year with less than a month to go before you hit the streets with a BA firmly clutched in your hands. One problem: you really haven't been working this term. Two papers due in a week-and-a-half and a first sentence hasn't passed from pen to paper. You chew your nails and drink a lot thinking about it. As you shuffle through to class on an anxiety-ridden day, a notice on a bulletin board catches your eye:

Essay Services Prompt Delivery

with a phone number attached.

A moral dilemma? Increasingly now, business for "term paper mills" is booming. Once an alternative available only to those with money to burn, prices are now well within the reach of the average student.

For the uninitiated, term paper mills are part of a growing phenomenon known within the university milieu as academic plagiarism. Defined as the "submission, for grading, of written work that is not the product of one's own intellectual activity," plagiarism is a matter of concern to the entire academic community.

Plagiarism is not particular to the seventies. There are, however, a number of recent developments to the problem.

Interviewing students for this feature, we found an overwhelming majority only too ready to offer rationalizations in defence of plagiarism. The moral question, they said, must be viewed within the context of present academic realities.

There are several factors contributing to the recent shift in attitudes. The first is connected with the tight job market resulting from Canada's recent economic stagnation. Students are much more career-conscious than they were ten years ago. The desire to acquire a good liberal arts education has been subordinated to tailoring a degree to fit employers' needs.

A second factor is the change in education policy caused by increased enrollments in the Faculty of Arts. Students are now processed rather than educated. The notion of the teaching staff monitoring stu-

dents' intellectual growth is largely a luxury of the past. In large classes, a student's contact with an instructor is often limited to a TA. The student/TA relationship does very little to curb the feeling of alienation. TAs have their own academic work and are often responsible for a large number of students.

The third element is the much-publicized illiteracy of today's student. First year university students are expected to know how to research and write a term paper, yet high schools and colleges are graduating pupils lacking those basic skills. Consequently, a common phenomenon among freshmen is a sense of desperation when confronted with paper assignments and firm deadlines.

The last element is the undue emphasis placed on grades. With the decline of a "personal education", marks have become the exclusive means of monitoring academic activity of the student.

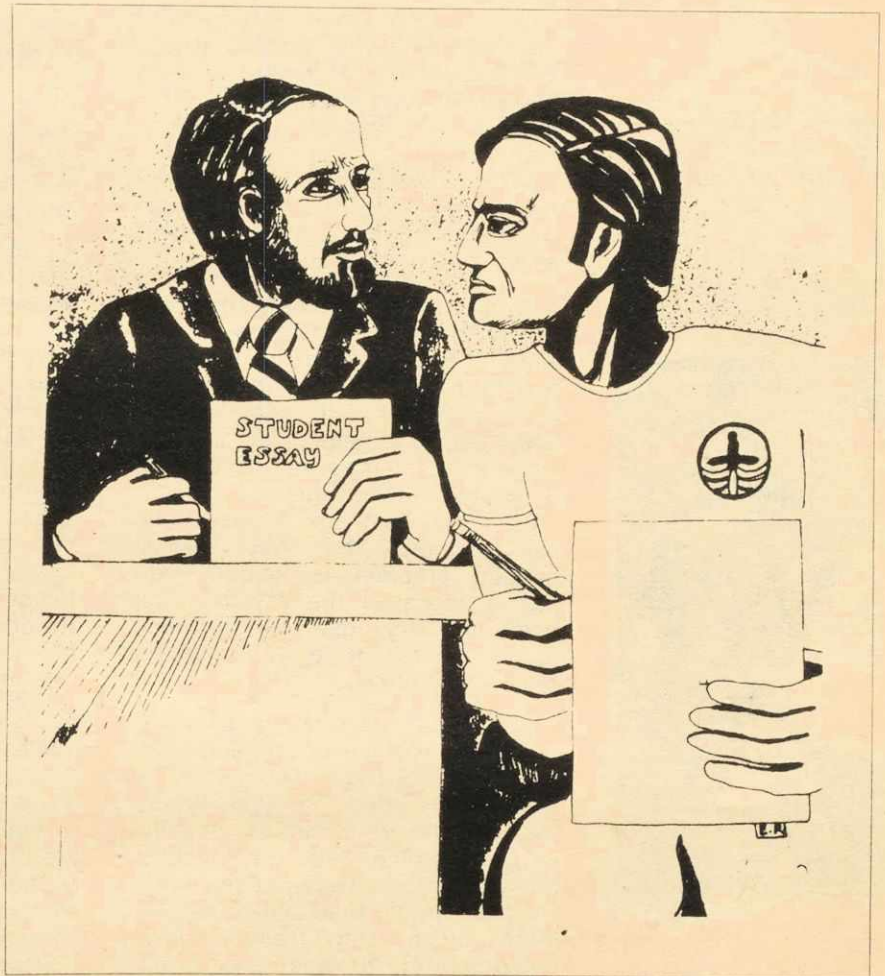
It is argued, from the perspective of the academic staff, that exams are a valuable tool in the learning process for they give the pupil a clear indication of areas of weakness. From the student's perspective, however, exams serve only to indicate in what areas he/she did not cram enough.

Cramming, or learning by rote, is superficial learning. Understanding, as opposed to mere memorization, is a product of analysis, guidance and time. It is not something that can be bought, sold or bargained for.

The use of grades as a mechanism for assessing progress has affected the role of the term paper in the educational system. Where once the professor not only graded the final work but provided a guiding force throughout the writing of the paper, today he or she offers, at most, only a brief comment accompanying the mark on the last page.

The result of the change in students' attitudes and university grading methods has been the growth of plagiarism. Buying, selling or trading term papers is much more acceptable and widespread an activity than it has ever been.

There are basically two ways in which students acquire term papers. The first is the "institu-



tional method": so-called "term paper mills".

Today's "research companies", as they prefer to be known, can be found in every major North American city. The majority of their work is undergraduate (especially 1st and 2nd year, says a Toronto-based firm) term papers. They provide either custom-written or catalogued work, and guarantee at least a passing grade.

Custom written work costs twice as much as catalogued papers. A Los Angeles firm offers custom-written papers for \$6.75 a page with seven page minimum and catalogued work for only \$3.50 a page. In contrast, a Toronto company offered a custom-written, fifteen page paper for \$10. The reporter was assured, however, that this was a "special deal" and that normal rates were double the price quoted. Both companies assure the purchaser that custom-written work will not be resold.

The cheaper, catalogued work is a more attractive alternative to undergraduates. The *Daily* wrote to a Los Angeles company asking for their catalogue and within a week a copy arrived. The catalogue lists "10,000 topics". Subjects range from existentialism to exchange theory, and everything in between. The Toronto firm, and one that operated in Montreal last year have equally comprehensive catalogues. Many of the catalogues tailor their topics to the local university's courses.

Who writes for "term paper mills"? Mostly people with MAs although there are a few PhDs, says the Toronto firm. A *Daily* reporter, posing as a jobless MA in need of work, contacted the Toronto company and was greeted enthusiastically. The manager told the *Daily* reporter it was the "busy season" and that writers were needed badly. He offered a starting salary of \$3.00 per page with work to begin immediately. For additional incentive he said several writers were currently earning up to \$450 per

week.

The term paper mills have managed to protect themselves from legal prosecution by calling themselves "research companies". They require all their clients to sign a form stating that material purchased will be used only for research and reference purposes. Some companies further protect their interests by using paper with a visible water mark, forcing the purchaser to retype the work.

There are also more informal ways for students to acquire term papers: trading, borrowing, or stealing them.

According to virtually everyone who has studied plagiarism, most plagiarism occurs this way. The majority of students have had some contact with this dimension, either in the form of using one's older sibling's paper or having a submitted work stolen from a hallway where an unthinking professor had left it for distribution.

Such an incident occurred recently at McGill. A professor left graded papers outside his office and within minutes they were stolen.

Students are often unaware that their work has been plagiarized. A classroom acquaintance asking to view a paper for an evening is not likely to arouse suspicion. In addition, not many students keep a careful accounting of all the papers they have ever written. For the determined plagiarist the system is wide open. "With a little skill it is possible to plagiarize in an infinite number of ways," says Professor Harry Anderson of McGill's English Department.

It is a pervasive problem and students and professors are often unwilling to recognize that they have been victims or participants in an act of plagiarism. "People don't want to confront the issue," says McGill Professor G. Piggott. Nobody is able to determine how large the problem is, he says, so plagiarism is just not discussed.

