

# York penalizes 74 students for buying essays out of the 700 to 800 order forms for essays, "maybe 300 were ours"

by Nancy Phillips

"Every single case has resulted in a conviction." —Associate dean of arts Shirley Katz.

**A**fter a nine-month investigation, Metro Police seized the files of the Custom Essay Service last April 5. On May 29, its owners, Derek and Elizabeth Sim, were charged with conspiracy to utter a forged document and seven counts of uttering a forged document. Each count carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Desperate, lazy or cynical students could buy essays from the service for anywhere from \$17 to \$35 a page.

*Excalibur* previously reported that the Sim's lawyer said the Custom Essay Service prepared research material. However, the bulk of this "research material" was handed in as original work by students all over Canada.

As a result of the police investigation, York was able to track down its students from the registry at the Custom Essay Service. So far, York has processed 74 cases and Marla Chodak, secretary of the academic hearing committee, says that out of the 700 to 800 order forms for essays, "maybe 300 were ours." In some cases there was an overlap, with one student having bought more than one essay.

Some offenders went into debt to buy their essays, said Katz, while a few had their parents buy essays for them.

Katz said some students were "genuinely devastated and truly ashamed of themselves," when their academic dishonesty was discovered. "Some were upset because they were caught and some told fanciful stories."

Katz added, "Most of them admitted they bought an essay, but not all said it was handed

in. Some said it was for research purposes." Katz asked, however, "Where did they get the idea that they could farm out the research?"

Some of the students were very cynical about what a university education is about, others had a slim understanding of why they came to university," Katz said these students often had a blurred line between right and wrong.

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One of the most disturbing discoveries was that most of the students who bought essays wanted to gain admission to either the faculty of education, law school or an accountancy programme. All of these professions are based on trust and integrity, qualities these students obviously do not value.

All cases of suspected academic dishonesty in the faculty of arts are processed first through the academic hearing committee. The committee is composed of Katz, who lays charges of academic dishonesty and presents the university's case, the charged student and, if the student desires, a lawyer or parent. Katz said students charged with offences relating to the Custom Essay Service had representation anywhere from the Community and Legal Aid Service Programme at Osgoode Hall Law School to the most prominent lawyers.

The academic hearing committee is elected, and is made up of eight faculty members and four students. It splits into three groups of two faculty members and one student to hear cases. The committee hears all cases of academic dishonesty and can impose a penalty from a failure on an assignment to a failure in a course. These penalties are accompanied by a notation on

the student's transcript stating that academic dishonesty is the reason for the low or failing grade. After five years the student can appeal to have the transcript notation removed.

The academic hearing committee also recommends harsher penalties when the case is more severe. It can recommend either a suspension, the withholding of a degree or the rescinding of a degree. These recommendations then go to the executive committee of the faculty of arts which decides whether or not to accept the recommendation.

Both committees impose penalties based on "clear and compelling evidence not beyond a reasonable doubt," said Katz.

She said the executive committee has now implemented all of the recommendations made by the academic hearing committee with regards to students charged with using the

Custom Essay Service.

She said the average suspension imposed was from three to five years, but that they ranged from six months to 10 years. She also said these students will find it impossible to be accepted at any university in Ontario and likely will not be accepted anywhere in Canada.

"There is zero tolerance for this kind of activity," said Katz.

Chodak said that of the 74 cases processed, 43 have resulted in a penalty of either a failure on an assignment or a failure in the course in question. All of these students will have transcript notations pointing out that the reason for the grade is academic dishonesty. Sixteen suspensions have been imposed by the executive committee, which still has to hear 15 cases. All of these have had course failures imposed as well as transcript notations, said Chodak. Some of the cases are being appealed (to the executive committee) and there is one case yet to be processed.

Katz said she wants students to be aware of the severity of academic dishonesty because "integrity is the life's blood of the university. Nobody would hire anyone from York if they thought the degrees were fraudulent." She said, "This is a tiny fraction" of the number of academic offences being committed at York and other universities, as the Custom Essay Service and other essay services, are still in operation.

Katz said the Crown thinks the university will have a strong, arguable case when the Custom Essay Service trial begins. Along with a conviction, Katz would like to see these services declared illegal. If the court doesn't decide in the university's favour, it will push for a criminal code amendment. Katz said students have not been criminally charged and that some are

witnesses for the Crown.

Katz said the cases of academic dishonesty resulting from the Custom Essay Service is only a tiny fraction of the numbers of actual academic offences that occur at York. She said essay services are now using numbers instead of names to keep track of their customers. Essays on any topic, from Canadian studies to English literature, can be ordered from catalogues available through the mail from the United States. One company advertises a catalogue with 19,278 different essays and claims to be a "valuable educational aid."

There are many other academic offences committed at York each year. Twenty-eight cases were processed during the 1988-89 school year at the faculty of arts, including plagiarism, smuggling pre-written exam books into exams, impersonation and unauthorized collaboration on course work.

Also, criminal charges of "personation at examination" were laid and convictions were obtained for several students last year. A York student had made arrangements through a third party to have someone impersonate him during a computer science exam. The scam was discovered when the impersonator panicked when the exam questions were different than the ones he was expecting.

He left the exam early, but left \$500 and a bank card behind. "We need prevention rather than punishment," said Katz. "We have to create an atmosphere where it is impermissible to cheat. We have to have students telling other students not to."

Look for accompanying article, p. 12

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**kitten collection to cover costs**

by Josh Rubin

**T**he student who rescued four kittens from the Winters cafeteria last week won't go broke to feed the little critters after all.

It seems that after reading about the student's plight in last Thursday's *Excalibur*, two members of York's English department have decided to take up a collection to cover the kittens' food.

Jan Pearson, secretary for the English graduate studies programme, urges anyone who wants to make a donation to contact her at extension #55387.