

IDEAS

A Society of Cheats

Students' use of AI is teaching them to cut corners, disdain rules, and believe that integrity is for suckers and wimps.

By John Paul Rollert

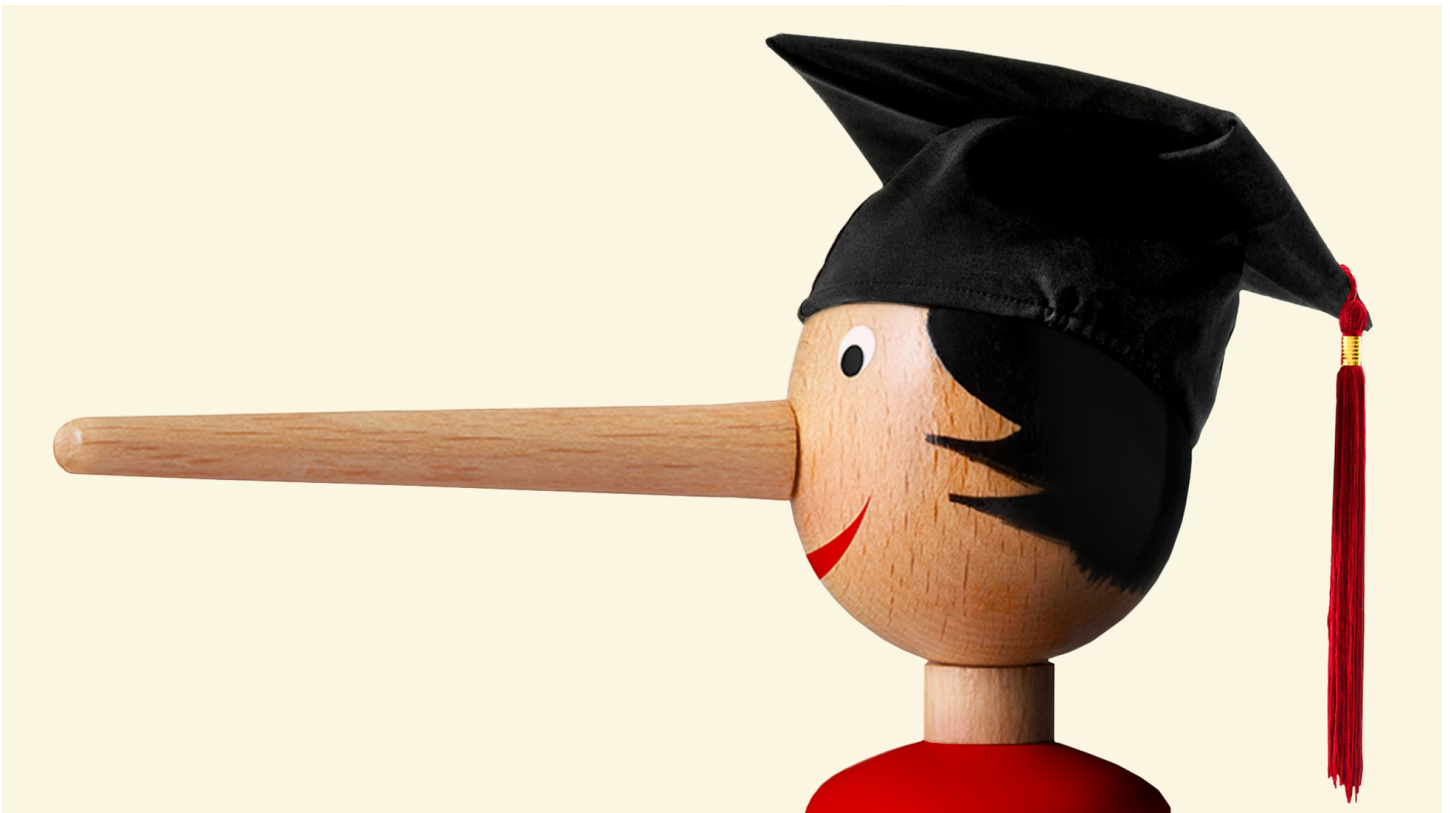


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RECENTLY, I HAVE TAKEN TO TELLING FRIENDS that whenever I'm on campus, I feel like I'm trapped in the middle of a crime spree. I'm not talking about an epidemic of overdue library books or out-of-control parties. I'm talking about AI and the ways in which students are constantly using it to cheat on any work that is assigned to them.

For those of us in higher ed—and I've taught at universities for more than 20 years—such widespread cheating is a baffling predicament. Universities are medieval creations. They are encrusted with eccentric customs, antique bureaucracies, and hierarchical privileges; any significant change typically comes about at a glacial pace. Not too long ago, I was still filling out grades in triplicate. I can liken the arrival of AI only to what it might have been like had a tribe of Neanderthals discovered a flying saucer hovering just outside their cave. To say that we were unprepared doesn't begin to describe the experience.

By now, there have been many articles about how undergraduates' promiscuous use of AI will affect their intellectual development, but I'm far more interested in its moral consequences. This is partly because I'm pretty confident about the former—I've told graduate students who actually learned how to write papers in college that I anticipate a generation of incompetents roughly a decade behind them—but also because I teach classes in leadership and business ethics, and I'm aghast at so many young people seemingly habituating themselves to cheating as a way of life.

Many students would no doubt object to this claim, but plainly that's what they're doing, cheating their way through their education. Every paper they don't write, every problem set they don't prepare, every serious reading they summarize into a memo—all of these are exercises in cutting corners, in getting by, and, at graduation time, in gaining a degree they didn't earn.

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That word is key: *earn*. To say that someone “earned” something is to apply a moral distinction to what one acquires. Not only can we get things we didn't earn, but we

can also obtain things we don't deserve. The first is the good fortune of the trust-fund kid, the second the province of a thief.

Students are spending a lot of time learning to be thieves nowadays, and once they receive their dubious diplomas, they will enter the “real world” with all the qualities of a criminal syndicate: a knack for cutting corners, a disdain for community rules, and an assumption that a spirit of integrity, and the sacrifices it assumes, is the reserve of suckers and wimps. We will be a society of cheats.

I BEGAN TO NOTICE THE CHANGE in the winter of 2023, when some of the writing assignments for my classes at Harvard and the University of Chicago took on qualities I had never seen before: squeaky-clean grammar, a superabundance of bullet points, and fairly robotic reiteration of facts rather than the pleasing lurch of original thinking.

This is the horrid house style of AI-generated papers; initially, it was not only the clumsiness of these papers that made them easy to dismiss but also the fact that the students submitting them were outliers. No longer. A spring survey by *The Harvard Crimson* found that one-third of the graduating class admitted to “using AI for an assignment against instructor permission,” which is a fairly sanitized way of saying “using AI to cheat.”

That survey was of students who'd entered college in the fall of 2022, before the mass adoption of AI tools. When it comes to students who are just arriving on campus this semester, I keep thinking about a colleague who teaches freshman composition at the University of Chicago. In the spring, he told me that, across all of the sections he had led over the past year, he believed that only three of his students submitted assignments written without the help of AI. Three students. In a class whose explicit aim is to teach writing.

At least part of the reason for this pervasive use of AI appears to be well-founded confidence that cheaters will not get caught, and that if they do, the consequences will be minimal. Take, again, the Harvard survey I mentioned. Among those 2026

graduates who admitted to “using AI for an assignment against instructor permission,” 93 percent of them said their cheating went undiscovered. Of the remaining students, more than half of them said they faced no disciplinary consequences *even after* they were caught. Just 2.6 percent of these students who used AI “against instructor permission” said they paid any price for their offenses—which, on the whole, is pretty good odds for anyone who is tempted to cheat.

For those inclined to break the rules, “playing the odds” is hardly an unusual strategy. It’s the corrupt cost-benefit analysis of fare evaders, speeding drivers, and tax cheats. It treats community rules not as common obligations but as opportunities for risk assessment. In the face of some illicit benefit, the question is not one of right and wrong, but of the likelihood of punishment.

Such thinking is especially seductive when it comes to “victimless crimes.” We often use that term, a hazardous oxymoron, to describe activities in which any benefits to the offender seem to outweigh any potential injury to others. To would-be offenders, the moral appeal of carrying out such crimes can be quite powerful, especially when the harm in question is remote or uncertain. *They* know the good they would enjoy, so it seems unjust and even gratuitous that they should deny themselves the reward when no serious harm would come to others.

My hunch is that this is how a lot of students see the unsanctioned use of AI. No real damage comes to any other person when they use these tools to write a paper or complete a problem set. At the same time, especially in a world where *everyone* is doing it—even some of their professors—why should they put themselves at a disadvantage of time, trouble, and professional advancement?

Of course, such logic already accepts one kind of harm: a debasement of the academic experience. A recent case out of Brown University provides a bleak illustration. In the spring, Roberto Serrano, an economics professor, decided to change the exam format for one of his classes from in-person to take-home. This was a generous concession on Serrano’s part to the anxiety that many of his students felt about being back in the classroom after the mass shooting on campus in December. How did students

respond? Once they heard about the change, enrollment soared. Nearly 90 students signed up for a class that had never had more than 30 before, and the average score on the midterm was 96, with 40 students “achieving” a perfect score.

One doesn't need the training of a tenured economist to know that this result is improbable. As Serrano told *Insider Higher Ed*, he ran his exam through ChatGPT and got answers similar to those of his unusually impeccable pupils—“kind of correct,” he said, but “with a very convoluted style.” And so, for the final exam, he switched back to an in-person format. Eighteen students immediately dropped the class. Nine students who remained did not take the exam at all. And among those who did, the average score was 48.6, the lowest average for a final exam in the history of his class by nearly 20 points.

Serrano was understandably sore. “We cannot afford to have a society in which a significant fraction of our best young minds think that cheating is OK,” he told *Inside Higher Ed*. “That leads to a declining society, to a failed society.” The specific failure he had in mind is intellectual—“We cannot choose to become idiots”—but the episode encapsulates the kind of moral rot that sets in whenever members of a community stop regarding rules as obligatory.

Set aside the offenders. For students in class who actually care about a subject, they know that they are surrounded by peers who are constantly cheating on their coursework. For professors who are excited to communicate new ways of thinking, they have to face a wall of young people who won't make even the barest effort to understand the subject matter. And for graduate students who are working as teaching assistants, they have to spend hours each semester grading bogus assignments, at the end of which they face the prospect of having to give out a passel of undeserved A's.

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This is the upshot of the crime spree under way at campuses across the country and around the world. It doesn't involve the same type of harm as spiking the water supply or setting a building on fire—harm that is immediate, overwhelming, and undeniable

—but, in the long term, it's no less destructive. It entirely corrupts the integrity of an academic community, because learning in a classroom is impossible when everyone knows that the proceedings are ridiculous.

GLACIAL THOUGH THEY MAY BE, universities are starting to respond. As *The Atlantic*'s Rose Horowitz reported in the spring, Princeton's faculty voted to mandate proctors for all in-person examinations. The decision is the most significant change to the university's famed Honor Code since it was first introduced in 1893, when the young men of Princeton successfully contended that their word alone should be enough to satisfy any concerns about cheating. For more than 130 years, students have had to attest: "I pledge my honor that I have not violated the Honor Code during this examination." Henceforward, they will still be asked to do so, but it will be merely a formality. The faculty has decided that students simply cannot be trusted.

This is how communities tend to respond to crime waves: They beef up law enforcement. Surveillance widens, punishments stiffen, and legal codes expand to police behavior that was formerly restrained by customary norms of honor, decorum, and mutual reciprocity. As the superintendents of their academic communities, faculty find themselves having to prioritize the disciplinary elements of their job. They will spend more time serving as judge, jury, and executioner, even when what they really want to do is what they do best: research and teach.

A suboptimal allocation of academic resources may be the least we have to fear from this crisis in higher ed. Even if faculty can curb this wave of cheating—and count me doubtful—it is the result of an unprecedented number of students deciding that they don't need to follow rules that disadvantage their own success and advancement, regardless of the implications for their peers and the corrosive effects on their community.

This is the mindset that young people across the country are graduating with, one less of strident careerism than of soft criminality. Relative to those who came before them, they will know very little, but they will be convinced of the wrong things, that the

world will get along just fine without integrity in one's work, trust in one's peers, and pride in one's community. These are all achievements, things you earn individually and together. You cannot steal them, but they can be taken from you—and they are being taken from all of us, faster than we know.

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