"Read this book . . . for [Callahan's] eye-opening portrait of the way we live now, his sobering analysis of how we got here and his prescient warning of where we may be headed if we don't get back our bearings."—LOS ANGELES TIMES

THE CHEATING CULTURE

UPDATED WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

WHY MORE AMERICANS ARE DOING WRONG TO GET AHEAD

DAVID CALLAHAN

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cheating from the Starting Line

JUST NORTH OF MANHATTAN, IN WHAT IS TECHNICALLY THE Bronx, lies the tony neighborhood of Riverdale. The area boasts Georgian mansions and ivy-covered apartment buildings with majestic views of the Hudson. Riverdale is also home to the eighteen-acre campus of the Horace Mann School, one of the most exclusive private day schools in the United States. Horace Mann might seem to be a place where young people would take for granted a prosperous future. The 1,000 students, ranging from two-year-olds in nursery school to high school seniors, come from some of the wealthiest families in America. If anyone has a shot at success it is these kids—with their trust funds, their parents' connections, their six-cylinder birthday presents, and their bedrooms jammed with the latest high-tech gadgets.

A Horace Mann education by itself would seem to be a ticket to the Winning Class. For a tuition of around $20,000 a year, the school offers a cornucopia of educational opportunities designed to prepare students to compete in the new economy. There is a sophisticated computer curriculum, instruction in seven languages,

an award-winning weekly newspaper (the school has produced twelve Pulitzer Prize–winning alums), a visual and performing arts program with ties to leading New York cultural institutions, and nearly fifty student clubs. The school's grounds include extensive playing fields that are immaculately maintained, an elaborate gymnasium complex, and seven tennis courts. Students can compete in twenty-three different sports. Horace Mann also has a crack team of college counselors, and the 110-year-old school long ago earned the nickname "Harvard Man." In past years, after the annual senior prom at the ritzy Pierre Hotel, as many as half of all graduates have gone on to Ivy League colleges.

Horace Mann is home to some very accomplished cheaters. For example, there's the star student who bought a term paper off the Internet to hand in for one of her classes. This in itself is not unusual. Downloading papers from the Internet, or plagiarizing parts of papers from the Web, is common at Horace Mann and many other high schools. The problem is that it's so common that sometimes two students will find the same paper on the Internet and hand it in at the same time, which is what happened to this particular girl. In talking about the assignments with her classmates, she found out that someone else had handed in the same paper. She was horrified. She had big plans to apply to top Ivy League schools. A scandal could throw a wrench into things. She immediately rushed to the teacher and begged to get the paper back, saying she needed to fix it. She never got caught. "She goes to Harvard now," says a recent Horace Mann grad who related this story. "These people learn how to work the system."

One student won notoriety for hacking into the school's computer system to change his grades. In another case, a group of students developed an elaborate system of signaling to swap answers during tests. Horace Mann is rife with rumors of other

sophisticated cheating scams, like special pens and pencils that are modified to hold cheat sheets. All of these tricks are designed for one purpose: to get into a top college.

"What Horace Mann programs you to think is that your purpose in life is getting into an Ivy League school," says another former student, who graduated from the school a few years back. "Success is purely numeric." Students are obsessed with their grades and are driven relentlessly to succeed. In many cases this drive is deeply ingrained in their family lives and immediate community. "There is a story that when I was seven I told my dad I was going to go to Princeton and that my two best friends would be my roommates," comments a third recent Horace Mann grad, who began attending the school at the age of three.

"I had one friend in particular who never did his own homework," this grad goes on to say. "He copied my homework every day. He may have bothered some people because he was a smart kid who didn't do anything. He was really good at cheating; he managed to cheat on the SATs. He was taking it untimed because of a learning disability. He would bring a pocket dictionary into the bathroom. He goes to Harvard now because his parents gave a lot of money. I don't see this as something that's going to change. The students at Harvard benefit because it has the biggest endowment in the country."

Some teachers at Horace Mann fan the competitiveness over grades and college admissions, at times openly stating the grades of students in class and publicly humiliating students who do poorly. Other faculty at Horace Mann acknowledge that the intense focus on grades and Ivy League schools goes too far, but say the school isn't to blame for these excesses. "Parents and kids fall back on brand names," the school's lead college counselor once explained, "believing it is their security in an increasingly insecure economy."[1] The obsession with guaranteeing one's advancement in the world,

along with the exclusive focus on ends, can easily justify dishonest means—not only at Horace Mann but at other schools, too. "You can forget what you're doing and think this is a very small thing and it will get me an A," says the student who was imagining his life at Princeton at age seven. "You feel that it's worth it; you're not stealing a test and passing it out, but if you copy a number off of a person next to you, you figure, it's not going to change how much I know at this point, but it will affect my grade, so why not?"

Thirteen miles south of Horace Mann, not far from a vast asphalt pit that used to be the World Trade Center, is another high school and another pressure cooker. But this one is filled with a very different kind of student. Stuyvesant High School was founded in 1904 as a "manual training school for boys." Over the years it evolved into something else entirely, and is now New York City's premier public high school—some even say the best public high school in the country. Stuyvesant has a new multimillion-dollar building overlooking the Hudson River that is almost as well equipped as Horace Mann, with laboratories and ubiquitous computer terminals, and facilities for its thirty athletic teams. Stuyvesant is known for its award-winning science students and killer debate team. Every year many of its students go on to the Ivy League.

Yet the school is anything but a bastion of privilege. Stuyvesant is a meritocracy of the rawest sort. It admits some 800 freshman students every year by a competitive examination that is open to any eighth grader in the city. Along with the Bronx High School of Science and just one or two other decent public high schools, Stuyvesant beckons as a path to economic security—in many cases the only possible path—for kids from middle- and lower-income New York families. Its building on the Hudson is a place of exalted dreams and of pent-up aspirations often traceable just a few decades back to peasant cultures abroad. But

Stuyvesant is also a place of profound desperation and extreme pressures.

Two decades ago, Stuyvesant's students were mainly Jewish or Eastern European. Back then, the school was located on East 15th Street, and it was filled with kids from neighborhoods in the East Village and Upper West Side. These days, New York's Jews and Greeks and Hungarians and Romanians have largely graduated to secure spots in the middle or upper middle class; most send their children to private schools. Stuyvesant today is filled with a new generation of strivers who are clawing their way up from the lower rungs of the economic ladder—Indian kids from Queens, Chinese kids from Chinatown, Koreans from all boroughs, and others: West Indians, Pakistanis, Vietnamese, Bengalis. Half of Stuyvesant's students are Asian Americans; many are from first- or second-generation immigrant families. It's not uncommon for Stuyvesant students to juggle part-time jobs on top of their schoolwork to help support their families.

The demanding nature of a Stuyvesant education is notorious. "The pressure at Stuyvesant was immeasurably greater than the pressure at Harvard," says Ben Shultz, who attended both schools. Students at Stuyvesant are expected to excel at all subjects—math, science, English, history—and there is no leeway to slide through the system by playing to one's strengths. Many students stay up late at night dealing with their crushing homework load and then walk around all day in a sleep-deprived daze. They take caffeine pills and amphetamines to keep themselves going. The amphetamine problem is serious enough that the school has sponsored seminars and lectures to raise student awareness about the drug's health risks.

The hardcore atmosphere at Stuyvesant intensifies at exam time, turning even more deadly serious. Quite apart from the pressures on students from themselves and teachers, many are burdened by parents who push them relentlessly—parents who discuss every grade on every exam, who know their kid's GPA as well as the kid does, who see academic success at Stuyvesant as the culmination of generations of struggle.

How do Stuyvesant students deal with these pressures? Often by cheating. "The whole culture was about cheating," says a former Stuyvesant student who returned after graduating to work as a guidance counselor at the school. "Everybody cheated." The atmosphere encourages it in multiple ways. The academic emphasis at Stuyvesant is on preparing students for the many tests that will determine their future: state regents tests, advanced placement tests, SAT tests, and the endless quizzes and exams that are the basis of grade point averages that students track obsessively.

"There was little focus on intellectual curiosity and only a focus on grades," says the former student. "Everybody was trying to get into Harvard and Yale. It was made very clear that that was the only way to succeed in life, and that you'd be a total failure if you didn't get into the right place." The emphasis on college admissions starts very early on at Stuyvesant. "In the beginning of freshman year, they sit you down and have a talk about starting to prepare for college applications," says Martina Meijer, a recent graduate. "They talk about keeping your grades up, and doing as many activities as you can. Everyone knows their average down to the hundredth point, which is sad. As a sophomore, I distinctly remember calculating how each test and quiz would affect my overall average."

The cheating culture at Stuyvesant, as at Horace Mann, has created folklore that is passed down among students and which grads remember many years later. Former students talk, for example, about the law of rising test scores. "There was a well-known pattern that people who took exams later in the day would do better on average," says Jesse Shapiro, who graduated from Stuyvesant

in 1997. It was considered the civic duty of morning students to fully brief afternoon students on the content—and answers—of tests in a given class. Students who were savvy, and unscrupulous, were wise to take courses in their weaker subjects in afternoon slots.

Another pattern suggested that supersmart students were the suns around which cheating planets revolved. Shapiro recalls a science teacher illustrating this pattern by drawing an isobar graph or contour map, on which he plotted the grades of an entire class to show how good grades radiated from certain points in the room.

New technological gadgets have introduced fresh legends into Stuyvesant's cheating folklore. Handheld text-messaging devices allow students to shoot test answers across the school, or even across a class, in seconds. Calculators, which students can often bring into math tests, are programmed in advance to contain answers. E-mail allows students to more easily share homework answers with each other during evening hours, while the Internet enables students to engage in the common practice of downloading papers and passing them off as their own. "Few original papers get written these days," commented one former Stuyvesant student.

Not all Stuyvesant students cheat, of course, and there is no solid data on which students are most inclined to cheat. But people have theories on this matter. Douglas Goetsch, a teacher at Stuyvesant, wrote an article for the school newspaper on the problem of cheating. He concluded from his own experience that nearly all the students who are cheating are those with an "excessively demanding parent."[2]

The knowledge that some students are cheating creates angst on the part of other students and may fuel their own cheating—what researchers call "the cheating effect." Students at Stuyvesant perceive college admissions as a zero-sum game in which another

student's gain is your loss. "You're simply competing with your classmates for a spot at a school," says Meijer, who is now at Amherst. "Harvard only takes a certain number of students from Stuyvesant each year."

HORACE MANN AND Stuyvesant High Schools are unusually competitive places, but more and more students are under the kinds of pressures found at these schools. Parents and students understand that the stakes of education have shot up in recent years. A growing obsession with college admission has been paralleled by increased cheating among high school students across the United States. According to large-scale national surveys by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, the number of students admitting that they cheated on an exam at least once in the previous year jumped from 61 percent in 1992 to 74 percent in 2002. "The evidence is that a willingness to cheat has become the norm and that parents, teachers, coaches and even religious educators have not been able to stem the tide," commented Michael Josephson, the institute's president.

Surveys by the institute have also found that more students say that they "sometimes lie to save money" than was the case in 1992, and that more are willing to lie to get a job. In addition, these surveys confirm the importance of financial success among today's young people. High school students rank "getting a high-paying job" above "being ethical and honorable," above following current events or participating in politics, and—most surprising—above being attractive or popular. Even as they place extreme importance on financial success, high school students also increasingly believe that "a person has to lie or cheat sometimes in order to succeed." Forty-three percent of the 12,000 high school students surveyed in 2002 agreed with this statement, up from 34 percent in 2000.

Nearly 40 percent also admitted that they were willing to lie or cheat to get into college. Do these students feel bad about all the corners they are willing to cut in life? Not at all. Three quarters of high school students said that they were more likely to do the right thing than most people they knew and 91 percent agreed that "I am satisfied with my own ethics and character."[3]

Another large survey of high school students, the annual opinion study *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, offers some additional insights into the problem of cheating among high schoolers. The *Who's Who* surveys have been conducted annually for thirty years and they have focused only on top high school students with good grades and college aspirations. The study first began asking about academic cheating in 1983. Since then, the number of students who admit to cheating at some time during their academic career has increased from 70 percent in 1983 to 80 percent in 2000.[4] The 2000 *Who's Who Among American High School Students* reported a record number of cheaters with A averages, with 80 percent of these students admitting to some form of academic dishonesty. Not only was the percentage of self-identified cheaters the largest ever recorded in the *Who's Who* survey, but most students indicated that cheating was "no big deal."[5]

Interestingly, America's top high school students aren't breaking rules in other areas. A review of findings from *Who's Who* over a twenty-five-year period concluded that teens "have over the years become more responsible and more mature about taking charge of their lives: fewer teens drink, smoke, or use marijuana, and more of sexually active teens use contraceptives these days."[6] This divergence underscores the lopsided nature of America's moral conversation over the past two decades. A nearly exclusive focus on drugs, sex, and crime has helped to change behavior among young people in these areas. But there has been little attention paid to problems like greed, materialism, and excessive competition. Young people seem to be hearing "just say no" about some temptations—and "do whatever it takes" about others.

THE ADMISSIONS OFFICE at Harvard College is a button-down, secretive place. It is accustomed to withstanding entreaties on behalf of applicants from some of the most powerful people in the world—from foreign leaders to U.S. senators to top CEOs. Discretion is a part of life for the admissions team, and it is not known for its rash pronouncements. Yet in 2000, the dean of admissions took the highly unusual step of publicly castigating America's parents for how they primed their young to succeed. In an essay co-authored with the director of admissions and another university official, Dean William Fitzsimmons put the college admissions craze in the context of broader trends: "Stories about the latest twenty-something '.com' multimillionaires, the astronomical salaries for athletes and pop-music stars, and the often staggering compensation packages for CEOs only stimulate the frenzied search for the brass ring.... More than ever, students (and their parents) seek to emulate those who win the 'top prizes' and the accompanying disproportionate rewards."[7]

The essay by Fitzsimmons and the other Harvard officials went on to offer a scathing analysis of elite educational competition—from cradle to college. Brutal competition begins even before kindergarten, the authors noted, when parents start jockeying to get their child into the right preschool. "The competition for admission to some of the Pre-K, Kindergarten, and grammar schools," they wrote, "can be...statistically more difficult (with lower admission rates) than Harvard."[8] Consultants are paid huge sums of money to coach and tutor preschoolers, including rigorous prepping to help the children impress interviewers at prestigious preschools with their ability to make eye contact and play nicely with others. At the same time, parents pull every conceivable string

to get their child into the right school. (The essay by the Harvard officials was published well before the revelations about a darkly comic episode of preschool corruption involving Jack Grubman, the Wall Street telecom analyst who allegedly upgraded AT&T's stock in an effort to get Citigroup chairman Sanford Weill to help Grubman's twins gain admittance to the 92nd Street Y preschool, one of the most elite preschools in New York City.)

The practices of parents become even more corrupt later, when college appears on the horizon. Not just any college will do for many parents. It must have a name lustrous enough to inoculate its grads against the insecurities of the new economy and serve as a stepping-stone to the Winning Class. As the Harvard admissions team writes, professional college counselors "appear on the scene early, sometimes in middle school, to begin to structure students' academic and extracurricular profiles for entrance to the 'right' college.... From a cynical perspective, such advice steers students toward travel abroad, community service, or other activities solely to enhance college essays or interviews."[9] One service in New York, Ivy Wise, offers a "platinum package" of college counseling services that costs nearly $30,000 and consists of twenty-four counseling sessions for a high school student beginning in eleventh grade. Similar services are cropping up in wealthy areas across the U.S. Whereas only 1 percent of college freshman admitted to consulting a private admissions counselor in 1990, 10 percent of today's students say they benefited from hired help.[10]

While many admissions counselors are ethical in the services they offer, others regularly cross the line in their work. Recently, Duke University began asking on its college application whether students had received help with their application material. The question was added amid growing evidence that many private college counselors are writing, or extensively editing, the personal essays of students. Elsewhere, admissions officers are growing adept at spotting overly "packaged" candidates. "One of the reasons we ask for a graded paper [in the college application] is that we can see a big difference in the quality of work that has been handed in for a course and what has been polished up for a college essay," says Jane Brown, who oversees admissions at Mount Holyoke College, in western Massachusetts. "We look for disjuncture in the application—to see who has been packaged." Brown says about the applications process that "cheating is up and it's not on the part of poor students necessarily. It's students who've done well and feel pressure to keep up.... There is a tremendous stress around getting into brand-name schools."

Down the road from Mount Holyoke, at ultra-competitive Amherst College, Dean of Admissions Tom Parker and his staff are also scrutinizing applications for signs of cheating. "Where we earn our money is when the evidence is mixed or contradictory—a bad essay with high scores or a terrific essay and a verbal score in the 500 or 600s." Parker, who has been in the admissions business for twenty years, says things are worse now than ever before. "There is a current cultural obsession with getting into a particular set of colleges, that somehow then your life will be taken care of, or if you don't the opposite will happen.... The hype and anxiety have grown to a fever pitch. It's also spreading around the country to places where it didn't exist. It's anxious parents. It's a changing economy."

The unethical help that high-paid private college counselors provide to high school students is paralleled by the rising problem of private tutors who do students' homework. The private tutoring industry has exploded in recent years. More and more wealthy parents already shelling out $20,000 a year for private-school tuition are also spending thousands of dollars on top of that for high-priced tutors. There are no licensing requirements for tutors, no ethical code of conduct, and no accountability to anyone except to

the parents who write the checks. Tutors know that their job hinges on getting results. "I have been asked to edit papers, and even write or rewrite sections of them, as well as to complete homework and to do research for students," says one woman, who worked as a tutor in New York to kids attending elite private schools. "There have been times when I have refused to actually complete homework for a student when the student tried to insist on it, and have had another tutor hired to do that work in my place. There have also been times when I have worked on assignments for students against my better judgment because I wanted to keep my job." This former tutor came to see the transgressions of her trade as part of a broader pattern. "Parents help their children to cheat while they're in high school and then donate money and make phone calls to board members to help their kids get into college." Parents believe that "everyone" gets aggressive private tutoring for their kids, the woman added, and "feel that since everyone is doing it, their child would be at a terrible disadvantage if they didn't."

An English teacher at one of New York's most exclusive prep academies thinks that this problem is so pervasive that it corrupts the entire academic process. "Tutors write a lot of the kids' papers," she says. "The kids are so heavily tutored sometimes it's hard to tell what is their work and what isn't." The teacher relates an instance where she pointed out an idea in a student's paper that seemed to make no sense. "My tutor says that's right," the student replied confidently, as if she were invoking wisdom imparted to her by a senior consultant at McKinsey. To combat tutor-assisted cheating, and other common forms of cheating at the school, the teacher has turned to assigning more in-class writing work. She feels that she can't turn to parents for help in combating cheating, since the parents are part of the problem. "The parents' attitude is generally 'Whatever gets you the grades, you should do. We don't care.'"

Many parents are going even further these days to help their kids. In a new trend, some parents are conspiring with doctors to manipulate the rules around disability to win extra time on the SATs for their perfectly capable child.

Cheating around disability rules is a delicate topic. The federal government bestowed official recognition on clinical learning disabilities in legislation passed by Congress in 1969. Within a single year, more than one million children had been designated learning disabled. The number of learning-disabled children—and the controversy surrounding their special status—has been growing ever since. By the mid-1990s, school districts across the country recognized 2.33 million students with learning disabilities. Children in the category soon accounted for more than half of all students with disabilities.[11]

While education officials in all fifty states use the term "specific learning disabilities" (SLD) to describe the problem of learning-disabled children, there is wide discrepancy in how this condition is defined and how students are granted SLD status. In some states, the diagnosis and handling of SLD students is narrowly regulated by law. Others provide little or no guidance to local school districts and individual schools. The result is widespread confusion that has nurtured controversy and opened the door to abuses of disability rules around the SATs.[12]

Educational Testing Services, which administers the SATs, has long permitted students with learning disabilities to have more time on the SATs—as much as double what is allowed for other students who take the three-hour test. ETS previously flagged the SAT scores of learning-disabled students who were granted the extra time, so that college admissions officers had this information. ETS dropped this practice a few years ago as a result of a 1999 lawsuit. Now the scores of students who take the SAT with extra

time are not differentiated in any way. The change made sense and was hailed by disability advocates who tell horror stories of discrimination against disabled kids.

But well-to-do parents have been quick to pick up on the huge opportunity that now exists to manipulate the system. In Westchester County, Dr. Jeanne Dietrich, a psychologist, has noted a spike in the number of parents seeking a diagnosis of learning disability for their college-bound child. Some parents openly tell Dietrich that their child had done poorly on the SAT and press for a quick diagnosis in order to meet the deadline to retake the tests. Another Westchester psychologist, Dr. Dana Luck, commented: "More and more people are asking legitimately.... But more and more are also asking because, why not ask? It's part of our culture that every point matters, so they're looking for any kind of edge."

This new type of cheating is not affordable to everyone. Luck charges $2,500 for an examination and $250 an hour to lobby school and ETS officials to grant SLD status to one of her patients.[13] Of some 30,000 students nationwide who are granted such status every year, a disproportionately larger number come from wealthy communities. Meanwhile, numerous poorer kids who truly deserve to have disability status don't get it because their parents can't afford the diagnosis. Along with private tutors who cross the line and college counselors who package kids, twisting disability rules is one more way for parents to give their kids every advantage. "I think it's the culture," comments a disability activist. "It's the mentality of aggressive, competitive parents who are playing the system against the kids who really need it. It's truly sad for the kids who have issues." At Amherst, Tom Parker is disheartened by this cheating, along with so much else that he sees on his job. "The unflagging is a terrible problem. What saddens me about this is that it was an honorable thing that the College Board did.... But in the

current atmosphere if you open the door a crack you have 5,000 people who want to manipulate it."

The new abuses around learning disabilities have a corrosive effect in academic environments already beset with ethical problems. The mother of a Horace Mann senior with mild dyslexia—but no formal SLD status—relates the outrage felt by her son about another student who manipulated the system. "Everybody knew this kid got the right tutors and extra time—that he cheated his way through school with a false LD diagnosis.... They grew up with him, and all of a sudden in high school he was getting extra time. This kid got in early to Penn and the other kids who played it straight were devastated. My daughter said to my son, 'You didn't play it right.'... What does this teach them ethically, because even though you're cheating your way, you're winning?"

The mother, who sent two of her children to Horace Mann, says that the problem reflects collusion between doctors, parents, kids, and school administrators. The kids have become adept at conning the system, too, by acting in ways that can secure them a disability status. "Years ago it was a stigma," she says about disability labeling. "Today it's another way to play the system for the people who know how to do it."

As THE RANKS of the affluent have swelled over the past two decades, so have the number of kids who receive every advantage in their education. The growing competition, in turn, has compelled more parents to spend more money and cut more corners in an effort to give their children an extra edge. Nothing less than an academic arms races is unfolding within the upper tiers of U.S. society. Yet even the most heroic—or sleazy—efforts don't guarantee a superior edge. Applications to the top schools reached their highest level ever in the late 1990s. In 1999–2000, the eight colleges

of the Ivy League received 121,948 applications—and rejected 80 percent of them. In 1999, the freshman class that enrolled at Brown University was culled from a vast deluge of applicants in which 3,500 applicants had been one of the top five members of their graduating classes. In the same year, Tufts University rejected one in three valedictorians who applied, as well as a number of applicants with perfect 1600 scores on the SAT.[14] College admissions directors at the best schools talk about the immense challenge of winnowing down large applicant pools filled with one perfect candidate after the other.

Many people scoff at the importance attached to name-brand schools, and it's easy to condemn the less savory motives of parents who want a Harvard kid. But the reality is that in a winner-take-all economy, and a society increasingly obsessed with "branding," a degree from a prestigious college matters more than ever. For example, many recruiters for America's best companies focus their search for entry-level professionals exclusively on the top schools in the nation, and for good reason. As any headhunter will explain, hiring personnel is extremely time consuming and fraught with risk. Because so many hires do not work out, as many as half in some settings, employers are essentially playing a numbers game; the higher the ratio of good hires to bad hires, the less time and money that gets wasted. These simple facts drive employers to focus on what they think are the most promising pools of labor. While there's no guarantee that, individually, students from top universities will be good hires, the risk of bad hires is judged to be lower in the aggregate. A kid hired straight out of Harvard might start every day with a bong hit and smoke a joint at lunch, while a new hire from Boston University might work like a demon until eleven every night. Even so, when an employer hires a Harvard grad, they believe that the odds are working in their favor.

The hiring practices of a company like Microsoft show how brand-name degrees can translate into a gilded rise to the Winning Class. During the 1980s, when Microsoft was still small, it exclusively recruited from fifteen top universities, including Harvard, Yale, Carnegie Mellon, and MIT. Brilliant geeks from the rest of America's colleges never had a chance to get in on the ground floor at Microsoft and land the generous stocks options that were part of the compensation packages for new programmers. Many of Microsoft's early employees went on to become multimillionaires.[15]

McKinsey & Company is another example of a leading firm that focuses its recruiting mainly on a pool of name-brand schools. The blue-chip consulting firm makes its money by convincing clients that the smartest people in the world will be coming in to solve their problems or improve their organization. McKinsey's leaders have long felt that this claim will be more believable if the firm is filled with Ivy grads and so McKinsey concentrates its recruiting efforts on these schools. A college grad or freshly minted Ph.D. who is tapped to join McKinsey has an opportunity that is simply not available to similarly brilliant people from other schools—namely, the opportunity to make partner at the immensely profitable firm and become a millionaire quite early on in life. This same kind of unique chance awaits law students who land jobs at white-shoe law firms like Cravath, Swaine & Moore, which also focuses its recruiting strictly on top name-brand schools.

In one study conducted by economists Robert Frank and Philip Cook, over a third of corporate recruiters indicated that they were focusing more attention on top-rated universities. Elite firms were most likely to be narrowly focused in their recruiting efforts.[16] Anecdotal evidence suggests that this discrimination occurs nearly every day at every kind of organization in America. Gatekeepers for the best corporations, government offices, law

firms, publishing houses, film production companies, nonprofit organizations, and media outlets all gravitate toward applicants with name-brand degrees.

The more general trend of rising income gaps across the workforce has also increased the stakes of education. "Over an adult's working life, high school graduates can expect, on average, to earn $1.2 million," reports the Census Bureau. "Those with a bachelor's degree, $2.1 million; and people with a master's degree, $2.5 million. People with doctoral ($3.4 million) and professional degrees ($4.4 million) do even better." These earnings gaps have increased steadily over the past few decades. In 1975, workers with advanced degrees earned 1.8 times as much as high school graduates. This gap increased to 2.6 times in 1999.[17]

Rising education costs place a further premium on doing well academically. If you're a straight-A student, you have a better shot at various scholarships and awards that can defray the cost of your education—or make it possible for you to afford college at all. In turn, the heavy debts that more young people graduate with make landing a good-paying job all the more crucial. These financial challenges have become greater in recent years, thanks to reduced government support for higher education. Tuition and fees at private and public universities have more than doubled in the past twenty years, outstripping the increase in various subsidies for higher education. More young people are going to college now than ever before, but since the late 1970s the gap in college attendance between low-income kids and wealthier young people has actually been growing—even as everyone acknowledges that more education is needed to make it in the information age.[18]

Young people understand all of this. "Students are remarkably sophisticated about these matters," write Frank and Cook, who argued that trends in education epitomize the winner-take-all society. "If access to the top jobs depends more and more on educational credentials, we would expect them to do everything in their power to improve their credentials, and indeed they have."[19]

We might also expect their parents to do everything possible. Given the staggering rewards and penalties now at stake in the battle for advancement, it's no surprise that parents will pay any price and break any rule to make sure that their child has every advantage—from the first days of nursery school until that imagined moment when the family SUV rolls up to a Harvard dorm on enrollment day. Or, for parents with lesser dreams and fewer means, that imagined moment when their child wins a full scholarship to a nearby state school.

It's no surprise, either, that once a student is in college, he or she will sense that the real competition has just begun.

"College is only one of many destinations in the fast lane," observed Harvard's dean of admissions and his colleagues. "The accumulation of 'credentials' simply continues to intensify as the stakes increase. The 'right' graduate school looms after college, and the 'right' sequence of jobs is next. Such attainments make it possible to live in the 'right' kinds of communities and begin the job of bringing up the following generation, one that might need to vault to even greater heights."[20]

How to assure smooth forward movement in the higher-education parts of this arduous journey? Be prepared to cut corners early and often.

Cheating by college students has long been a problem. In 1931, Dean Clarence W. Mendell of Yale declared the problem of cheating at the school to be "so prevalent as to demand instant and sweeping measures of reform."[21] Hundreds of studies have been conducted over the past eighty years that look at why, when, and how college students cheat on their academic work. In a 1938 survey, a majority of students who indicated they thought it was "right to cheat" justified cheating on the grounds that "it gives one a

chance to keep up with those who do cheat."[22] A 1941 survey of college students discovered a dramatically higher incidence of cheating among members of fraternities—a jump attributed to the requirement that members maintain a high grade point average.[23] The academic study of cheating grew after a high-profile 1951 scandal, in which nearly ninety cadets were dismissed from the United States Military Academy for taking part in a conspiracy to get test questions in advance.[24]

In 1964, William Bowers published *Student Dishonesty and Its Control in College*, the most authoritative study up to that time on academic cheating. Based on surveys of more than 5,000 students at ninety-nine colleges and universities, Bowers concluded that three quarters of all students had engaged in some kind of cheating, and he drew a variety of other conclusions from his data. He found that students who ranked social and professional aspirations at the top of their list of college priorities tended to be more likely to cheat than students who saw college as a training ground for moral and intellectual development. He also found that in most cases there is no difference in the likelihood of cheating among students of different social backgrounds who were attending the same type of school."[25]

Scores of scholars followed in Bowers's footsteps after the publication of his seminal study, confirming the high levels of student cheating. Different methodologies were developed to document and explain academic cheating. The research also moved beyond college students, examining high school and graduate students. To overcome the notorious problem of surveys, namely that they depend on "self-reporting," some researchers concocted controlled experiments where students were given an opportunity to cheat and then were carefully observed.

These days, if the education establishment had a chief detective, it would be Donald McCabe. McCabe is a professor of man-

agement at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, and the founder of the Center for Academic Integrity. Years ago, like many professors in academia, McCabe was shocked to find out how much cheating went on among college students. Unlike most professors who do little about such cheating, McCabe decided to take action. He began researching the problem in the early 1990s with rigorous surveys involving thousands of students. He also founded the center and became its first president. After a decade of research including six major studies, McCabe is without question the leading national authority on cheating among high school and college students. McCabe's surveys at dozens of college campuses have revealed overall levels of cheating similar to what Bowers found in the 1960s—with roughly three quarters of students confessing to some kind of cheating—but McCabe suggests that today's college students are more likely to be engaged in serious cheating. McCabe has also documented increases of cheating in the 1990s of between 30 and 35 percent.

Why college students cheat remains a complex and disputed matter. Students cite a wide range of factors in explaining their cheating, including time pressures, the ease of cheating via the Internet, and the tolerance of cheating by faculty. McCabe sets this array of explanations within the broader context of today's high-stakes academic environment. Writing with two colleagues in 2001, McCabe commented: "With increasing competition for the most desired positions in the job market and for the few coveted places available at the nation's leading business, law, and medical schools, today's undergraduates experience considerable pressure to do well. Research shows that all too often these pressures lead to decisions to engage in various forms of academic dishonesty." McCabe also suggests that a tipping point has been passed in many academic environments. "Students who might otherwise complete their work honestly... convince themselves they cannot

afford to be disadvantaged by students who cheat and go unreported or unpunished. Although many find it distasteful, they too begin to cheat to 'level the playing field.'"[26]

McCabe and his colleagues have explored cheating not just through surveys but through campus focus groups where students are encouraged to discuss their reasons for cheating. Students indicate a deep cynicism about what it takes to make it in America: "The world isn't fair and sometimes to get where you want you have to sacrifice some integrity," said one student. Another commented, "I figure a (small or large) percentage of the student body is already cheating in order to improve their grade, so I might as well cheat once in a while to help myself. I also believe that a portion of 'successful' people in today's world have cheated in their life from time to time, and they are successful because they have been smart enough to avoid getting caught."

The choice between being a winner or a loser in an economy filled with inequities seems stark and frightening to many college students. Says one student: "Grades are the most important things which judge whether you go to medical school or to work as a janitor."[27]

Academic dishonesty increasingly continues after college in graduate programs. Cheating among graduate students has been far less well researched than cheating at the undergraduate level, but a number of studies suggest that graduate school cheating may be as serious a problem as undergraduate cheating—especially in law, business, and medical schools, which are all training students to perform critical tasks and are nurturing the future leaders of our society.[28]

What becomes of the many students who cheat their way through school? Well, according to some scholarly research, young people who cheat in academics are more likely to cheat in other environments, such as workplace or business situations, and on taxes.[29]

Business students are among those with the worst attitudes toward cheating, and those most likely to bring lax ethics into their professional lives. A 2001 study of 1,000 business students on six campuses found that "students who engaged in dishonest behavior in their college classes were more likely to engage in dishonest behavior on the job."[30] With up to a quarter of college students typically choosing to major in business or a related field, and over 100,000 MBAs graduating annually, widespread cheating among business students is not an insignificant problem.

CHEATING IN POST-ACADEMIC life often begins during the creative sculpting of the all-important résumé and the holy quest for the right job. The job search is the culmination of years of sacrifice and toil. For many, it is a moment of truth: Will you succeed or will you end up working at Blockbuster?

During the boom years of the 1990s, the stakes for elite young job seekers were higher than ever before. Join the right dotcom start-up, with a generous package of stock options, and you could find yourself transformed into a centamillionaire in a few short years. Get passed over for another candidate, and that gilded dream vanishes into thin air, replaced by the dreary prospect of actually working your way up in the world. Today, in the aftermath of the boom, the stakes are also high—namely, basic survival. Over two million jobs disappeared in the U.S. between 2001 and 2003, with some of the most competitive and lucrative industries getting hit the hardest. Stories abound of highly educated young professionals working in sales jobs or not working at all.

With the stakes of job hunting now so high in both good times and bad, it should come as no surprise that more job seekers

misrepresent their credentials. The American résumé, in fact, is right up there with lawyers' time sheets and corporate earnings statements as among the most misleading documents around.

Many people start lying on their résumés while in school and continue to do so throughout their careers. A 1997 study by a company that does preemployment screening found that 95 percent of college-age respondents were willing to lie in order to get a job—and that 41 percent of the students had already done so. Veterans of employment placement firms and human resource offices say that while résumé padding has always been a problem, it's reached crisis proportions in recent years. A review of 2.6 million job applications in 2002, by a national firm that conducts background checks, revealed that 44 percent contained at least some lies. Likewise, 41 percent of applications reviewed by a New Jersey–based verification firm contained information about education that was contradicted by the records of named institutions.[31]

In another large survey, HireRight, an Internet company that does background checks, found that 80 percent of all résumés were misleading—and a fifth included fabricated degrees. Since 1995, Jude Werra, a headhunter based in Wisconsin, has published what he calls the Liar's Index, which is based upon the percentage of résumés that he reviews that refer to bogus degrees. The Liar's Index reached its peak in the first half of 2000, with 23.3 percent of the résumés failing the accuracy test.[32] While Werra's data suggests that the greed of boom times brings out more lying than the anxiety of bad times, other headhunters disagree. "Since the bubble burst there is far more supply than demand," says Arnold Huberman, who runs his own search firm in Manhattan specializing in public relations jobs. "It's a much more competitive landscape. Therefore if someone comes in and shows us two graduate degrees, we'll check that."

Young people right out of school or still early in their careers

are likely to be most insecure about their credentials. But résumé padding also goes on at the very top of the employment food chain. Christian & Timbers, a search firm that handles applications for CEOs and other top executives, has reported that up to a quarter of candidates provide misleading information.[33]

Many CV cheaters go far before their lies catch up with them. In 2002, Ronald Zarrella, the CEO of Bausch & Lomb, one of America's largest pharmaceutical companies, admitted that he did not have an M.B.A. from NYU, as he had long contended. Zarrella initially claimed that he hadn't proofread his official bio carefully enough. Later, when it was pointed that the same "typo" had been repeated in numerous news releases, including during his previous job, he came clean about his "lapse in judgment." Zarrella stayed on as CEO but was docked one year's bonus pay. The lie cost him over $1 million—a pittance, given that his fake credentials had helped him make many millions of dollars before he was unmasked.[34]

A year earlier, George O'Leary was hired as Notre Dame's football coach in a seven-figure deal—and fired shortly afterward when it was learned that he had lied about having a master's degree from NYU. (What is it about NYU?) O'Leary's brother Tom offered a spirited defense of him to a *Sports Illustrated* reporter: "Is anyone trying to tell me that résumés are truthful? In the America we live in, the willingness to lie on a résumé is an indication of how much you want the job."[35]

Olympic head Sandra Baldwin is another high-profile figure recently ousted from a lucrative job after the truth caught up with her. Her official résumé at the U.S. Olympic Committee claimed that she had graduated from the University of Colorado in 1962 and then obtained her Ph.D. in English from Arizona State in 1967. In fact, Baldwin had only earned an M.A. in English at Arizona State in 1969. "I knew how important education had been to my folks," she told a *New York Times* reporter, in recounting the

difficulties of surviving the death of both parents when she was eighteen years old. "This put me on the course of not quitting." Baldwin even cited the name of her nonexistent dissertation—"Neo-Classical Backgrounds of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Aesthetics." In the same interview she asked: "What do you do with a Ph.D. in English?"[36]

One might wonder just how, exactly, anyone gets hired to a top management job with a fake educational degree. Even the laziest human resources bureaucrat or executive recruiter should be able to find time to make a five-minute phone call to a university records office.

Randy Neal, a managing director at an executive search firm in Dallas, recalls the ease with which he uncovered the lies of a would-be company head. "We were doing a search for a CEO, and a candidate presented his credentials," Neal remembers. "He had a pretty long list with pretty big success stories with some well-known and some less well-known companies. The guy was an extremely articulate talker. I met him at the airport and he impressed me. The client met the candidate and, like myself, was totally convinced that this was the guy." At that point, Neal started to do some digging, checking the man's background and references. "Right away we saw a red flag. A company that he had portrayed as a $200 million company really consisted of only two people. He tried to explain, but it was a complete falsehood. As we got checking further we started to find further inconsistencies.... Here is an example of a person who completely falsified his background."

Neal chuckles at the memory and starts in on another chilling yarn. "I had a case where a candidate had assumed someone else's identity." Like other headhunters, Neal has a quite a few of these stories. "We're talking executive-level positions," he says.

Neal and other professionals in the hiring business say that there are five or six common kinds of lies that appear on résumés.

Each has its own logic. People lie about their educational credentials for the obvious reason that better-educated people get better jobs and are paid more money. The income gaps related to credentials help explain the desperation reflected on résumés, which can be downright farcical at times. Monica Ronan, who hires for *TV Guide*, recalls checking out one job candidate's claim of a B.A. only to find that the college didn't exist at all. In cases like these, an applicant's stupidity may be a better reason for rejection than their dishonesty.

Beyond educational credentials, candidates also lie about how much money they made in past positions. "There are a lot of people who will stretch the truth a little bit—saying they made $200,000 instead of $180,000," Randy Neal says. Why? Because future compensation is almost always based upon past compensation. Other lies include length of job tenure (nobody wants to look flaky), reasons for dismissal (nobody wants to admit they were fired), and level of responsibility (everyone wants to seem more experienced than they are).

In 2002, shareholders in the software company Veritas—which means *truth* in Latin—saw the value of their holdings plummet by 20 percent when it was revealed that the company's chief financial officer, Kenneth Lonchar, had lied about having an M.B.A. from Stanford. Understandably, the market was a bit unnerved by the news that the same guy who signed off on earnings reports had also fabricated his résumé.

High-tech investors were even more rattled several years earlier when Lotus president Jeff Papows was ousted after it was learned that he had not only fabricated his academic record but also misrepresented his tae kwon do ranking and lied about past military service.

Papows, who led a $1.4 billion subsidiary of IBM, even falsely claimed to have been an orphan.

PERVASIVE DISHONESTY among students and job seekers is often treated as a puzzle by the media. Reporters parachute into schools to listen to tales of cheating, and then write stories that offer a muddle of explanations. Or, when some bigwig is found to have lied about his degrees, the media will ask a shrink to explain where the loose screw might be.

Yet maybe the real mystery is that there isn't *more* cheating by young people and job seekers. After all, the stakes are enormously high. The difference between getting into Harvard and getting into, say, Rutgers can easily shake out to several millions dollars over a lifetime. And the costs of being unemployed are greater now than in the past, with skimpier unemployment benefits and higher costs for necessities like housing and health care. More generally, the difference between good jobs and bad jobs is big and getting bigger in American society. Nobody wants to be caught on the wrong side of the widening chasm between the haves and have-nots. Cheating is one way not to be left behind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Crime and No Punishment

WE LOVE TO PUNISH PEOPLE IN AMERICA—SOME PEOPLE, at least.

The United States is more punitive than any other advanced democratic society. We stand alone among such nations in putting people to death. We have "three strikes" policies that can send people to jail for life for petty theft. We are uniquely tough with the poor and unemployed, cutting off benefits to the jobless whether the economy has improved or not. We mete out long prison terms for drug offenses that are treated as personal health problems in Western Europe or Canada. We expel children from our schools for misbehavior under "zero tolerance" policies. For a while, we even had a Speaker of the House (Newt Gingrich) who advocated forcing unwed mothers to give up their children to orphanages.

Toughness runs deep in the veins of American culture. We imagine ourselves as a country where everyone is responsible for themselves and if you don't pull yourself up by your bootstraps, something must be wrong with you. The linguist George Lakoff