

## Opinions

# When ambition trumps ethics

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On Monday, approximately 1,600 freshmen arrived at Harvard College. On Wednesday, I had the pleasure of spending 90 minutes with 20 of these students. They impressed me with their intellect but also with their empathy and willingness to listen to and learn from one another. They were excited by the opportunity to be at Harvard; they used such superlatives that I joked to colleagues that in a few years, they would be so critical, if not cynical, they would have a hard time believing their earlier enthusiasm.

On Thursday, I and many others learned of the university's [largest cheating scandal](#) in living memory. According to news reports, close to half of the 250 undergraduates in "Introduction to Congress" are being investigated for allegedly cheating on a final examination. The fate of individual students is not yet known, but this event will clearly be a stain on Harvard's reputation as large and consequential as that suffered by the service academies in earlier decades.

Many wonder how this could have happened at "MGU" (man's greatest university). They will ask whether a large number of the same enthusiastic and loving students I met with Wednesday might well, in a year or two, be part of a cheating scandal themselves. The answer, I fear, is yes.

I've been at Harvard for more than half a century — as an undergraduate, a graduate student, a researcher and, for almost three decades, a professor. I know the university well, and in many ways I love it. Yet almost 20 years ago I became concerned about the effect that market ways of thinking has on our society, particularly our young. Colleagues and I undertook a study of "good work." As part of that study, we interviewed 100 of the "best and brightest" students and spoke with them in depth about life and work.

The results of that study, reported in the book "[Making Good](#)," surprised us. Over and over again, students told us that they admired good work and wanted to be good workers. But they also told us they wanted — ardently — to be successful. They feared that their peers were cutting corners and that if they themselves behaved ethically, they would be bested. And so, they told us in effect, "Let us cut corners now and one day, when we have achieved fame and fortune, we'll be good workers and set a good example." A classic case of the ends justify the means.

We were so concerned by the results that, for the past six years, we have conducted reflection sessions at elite colleges, including Harvard. Again, we have found the students to be articulate, thoughtful, even lovable. Yet over and over again, we have also found hollowness at the core.

Two examples: In discussing the firing of a dean who lied about her academic qualifications, no student supported the firing. The most common responses were “She’s doing a good job, what’s the problem?” and “Everyone lies on their résumé.” In a discussion of the documentary “[Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room](#),” students were asked what they thought of the company traders who manipulated the price of energy. No student condemned the traders; responses varied from caveat emptor to saying it’s the job of the governor or the state assembly to monitor the situation.

One clue to the troubling state of affairs came from a Harvard classmate who asked me: “Howard, don’t you realize that Harvard has always been primarily about one thing — success?” The students admitted to Harvard these days have watched their every step, lest they fail in their goal of admission to an elite school. But once admitted, they begin to look for new goals, and being a successful scholar is usually not high on the list. What is admired is success on Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood — a lavish lifestyle that, among other things, allows you to support your alma mater and get the recognition that follows.

As for those students who do have the scholarly bent, all too often they see professors cut corners — in their class attendance, their attention to student work and, most flagrantly, their use of others to do research. Most embarrassingly, when professors are caught — whether in financial misdealings or even plagiarizing others’ work — there are frequently no clear punishments. If punishments ensue, they are kept quiet, and no one learns the lessons that need to be learned.

Whatever happens to those guilty of cheating, many admirable people are likely to be tarred by their association with Harvard. That’s the cost of being a flagship institution. Yet this scandal can have a positive outcome if leaders begin a searching examination of the messages being conveyed to our precious young people and then do whatever it takes to make those messages ones that lead to lives genuinely worthy of admiration. #