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Cheating Goes Global as Essay Mills Multiply

By Thomas Bartlett

The orders keep piling up. A philosophy student needs a paper on Martin Heidegger. A nursing student needs a paper on dying with dignity. An engineering student needs a paper on electric cars.

Screen after screen, assignment after assignment—hundreds at a time, thousands each semester. The students come from all disciplines and all parts of the country. They go to community colleges and Ivy League universities. Some want a 10-page paper; others request an entire dissertation.

This is what an essay mill looks like from the inside. Over the past six months, with the help of current and former essay-mill writers, The Chronicle looked closely at one company, tracking its orders, examining its records, contacting its customers. The company, known as Essay Writers, sells so-called custom essays, meaning that its employees will write a paper to a student's specifications for a per-page fee. These papers, unlike those plucked from online databases, are invisible to plagiarism-detection software.

Everyone knows essay mills exist. What's surprising is how sophisticated and international they've become, not to mention profitable.

In a previous era, you might have found an essay mill near a college bookstore, staffed by former students. Now you'll find them online, and the actual writing is likely to be done by someone in Manila or Mumbai. Just as many American companies are outsourcing their administrative tasks, many American students are perfectly willing to outsource their academic work.

And if the exponential surge in the number of essay mills is any indication, the problem is only getting worse. But who, exactly, is running these companies? And what do the students who use their services have to say for themselves?

Go to Google and type "buy an essay." Among the top results will be Best Essays, whose slogan is "Providing Students with Original Papers since 1997." It's a professional-looking site with all the bells and whistles: live chat, flashy graphics, stock photos of satisfied
students. Best Essays promises to deliver "quality custom written papers" by writers with either a master's degree or a Ph.D. Prices range from $19.99 to $42.99 per page, depending on deadline and difficulty.

To place an order, you describe your assignment, the number of pages, and how quickly you need it. Then you enter your credit-card number, and, a couple of days later, the paper shows up in your in box. All you have to do is add your name to the top and turn it in. Simple.

What's going on behind the scenes, however, is another story.

The address listed on the site is in Reston, Va. But it turns out that's the address of a company that allows clients to rent "virtual office space" — in other words, to claim they're somewhere they're not. A previous address used by Best Essays was a UPS store in an upscale strip mall. And while the phone number for Best Essays has a Virginia area code, that line is registered to a company that allows customers to forward calls anywhere in the world over the Internet.

The same contact information appears on multiple other essay-mill Web sites with names like Rush Essay, Superior Papers, and Best Term Paper. All of these sites are operated by Universal Research Inc., also known as Essay Writers. The "US/Canada Headquarters" for the company, according to yet another Web site, is in Herndon, Va. An Essay Writers representative told a reporter that the company's North American headquarters was a seven-story building with an attached garage and valet parking.

That was a lie. Drive to the address, and you will find a perfectly ordinary suburban home with a neatly trimmed front lawn and a two-car garage. The owner of the house is Victor Guevara and, ever since he bought it in 2004, he has received lots of strange mail. For instance, a calendar recently arrived titled "A Stroll Through Ukrainian Cities," featuring photographs of notable buildings in Odessa and Yalta. Not all of the missives, however, have been so benign. Once a police officer came to the door bearing a complaint from a man in India who hadn't been paid by Essay Writers. Mr. Guevara explained to the officer that he had no idea what the man was talking about.

So why, of all the addresses in the United States, was Mr. Guevara's chosen? He's not sure, but he has a theory. Before he bought the house, a woman named Olga Mizyuk lived there for a short time. The previous owner, a friend of Mr. Guevara's, let her stay rent free because she was down on her luck and she promised to teach him
Russian. Mr. Guevara believes it's all somehow connected to Ms. Mizyuk.

That theory is not too far-fetched. The state of Virginia listed Olga Mizyuk as the agent of Universal Research LLC when it was formed in 2006, though that registration has since lapsed (it's now incorporated in Virginia with a different agent). The company was registered for a time in Nevada, but that is no longer valid either. The managing member of the Nevada company, according to state records, was Yuriy Mizyuk. Mr. Guevara remembers that Ms. Mizyuk spoke of a son named Yuriy. Could that all be a coincidence?

Hiring in Manila

Call any of the company's several phone numbers and you will always get an answer. Weekday or weekend, day or night. The person on the other end will probably be a woman named Crystal or Stephanie. She will speak stilted, heavily accented English, and she will reveal nothing about who owns the company or where it is located. She will be unfailingly polite and utterly unhelpful.

If pressed, Crystal or Stephanie will direct callers to a manager named Raymond. But Raymond is almost always either out of the office or otherwise engaged. When, after weeks of calls, The Chronicle finally reached Raymond, he hung up the phone before answering any questions.

But while the company's management may be publicity shy, sources familiar with its operations were able to shed some light. Essay Writers appears to have been originally based in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. While the company claims to have been in business since 1997, its Web sites have only been around since 2004. In 2007 it opened offices in the Philippines, where it operates under the name Uniwork.

The company's customer-service center is located on the 17th floor of the Burgundy Corporate Tower in the financial district of Makati City, part of the Manila metropolitan area. It is from there that operators take orders and answer questions from college students. The company also has a suite on the 16th floor, where its marketing and computer staff members promote and maintain its Web sites. This involves making sure that when students search for custom essays, its sites are on the first page of Google results. (They're doing a good job, too. Recently two of the first three hits for "buy an essay" were Essay Writers sites.) One of its employees, who describes herself as a senior search-engine-optimization specialist at Uniwork, posted on her Twitter page that the company is looking for copy
writers, Web developers, and link builders.

Some of the company's writers work in its Makati City offices. Essay Writers claims to have more than 200 writers, which may be true when freelancers are counted. A dozen or so, according to a former writer, work in the office, where they are reportedly paid between $1 and $3 a page — much less than its American writers, and a small fraction of the $20 or $30 per page customers shell out. The company is currently advertising for more writers, praising itself as "one of the most trusted professional writing companies in the industry."

It's difficult to know for sure who runs Essay Writers, but the name Yuriy Mizyuk comes up again and again. Mr. Mizyuk is listed as the contact name on the domain registration for essaywriters.net, the Web site where writers for the company log in to receive their assignments. A lawsuit was filed in January against Mr. Mizyuk and Universal Research by a debt-collection company. Repeated attempts to reach him — via phone and e-mail — were unsuccessful. Customer-service representatives profess not to have heard of Mr. Mizyuk.

Installed in its Makati City offices, according to a source close to the company, are overhead cameras trained on employees. These cameras reportedly send a video feed back to Kiev, allowing the Ukrainians to keep an eye on their workers in the Philippines. This same source says Mr. Mizyuk regularly visits the Philippines and describes him as a smallish man with thinning hair and dark-rimmed glasses. "He looks like Harry Potter," the source says. "The worst kind of Harry Potter."

Writers for Hire

The writers for essay mills are anonymous and often poorly paid. Some of them crank out 10 or more essays a week, hundreds over the course of a year. They earn anywhere from a few dollars to $40 per page, depending on the company and the subject. Some of the freelancers have graduate degrees and can write smooth, A-level prose. Others have no college degree and limited English skills.

James Robbins is one of the good ones. Mr. Robbins, now 30, started working for essay mills to help pay his way through Lamar University, in Beaumont, Tex. He continued after graduation and, for a time, ran his own company under the name Mr. Essay. What he's discovered, after writing hundreds of academic papers, is that he has a knack for the form: He's fast, and his papers consistently earn high marks. "I can knock out 10 pages in an hour," he says.
"Ten pages is nothing."

His most recent gig was for Essay Writers. His clients have included students from top colleges like the University of Pennsylvania, and he's written short freshman-comp papers along with longer, more sophisticated fare. Like all freelancers for Essay Writers, Mr. Robbins logs in to a password-protected Web site that gives him access to the company's orders. If he finds an assignment that's to his liking, he clicks the "Take Order" button. "I took one on Christological topics in the second and third centuries," he remembers. "I didn't even know what that meant. I had to look it up on Wikipedia."

Most essay mills claim that they're only providing "model" papers and that students don't really turn in what they buy. Mr. Robbins, who has a law degree and now attends nursing school, knows that's not true. In some cases, he says, customers have forgotten to put their names at the top of the papers he's written before turning them in. Although he takes pride in the writing he's done over the years, he doesn't have much respect for the students who use the service. "These are kids whose parents pay for college," he says. "I'll take their money. It's not like they're going to learn anything anyway."

That's pretty much how Charles Parmenter sees it. He wrote for Essay Writers and another company before quitting about a year ago. "If anybody wants to say this is unethical — yeah, OK, but I'm not losing any sleep over it," he says. Though he was, he notes, nervous that his wife would react badly when she found out what he was doing. As it happens, she didn't mind.

Mr. Parmenter, who is 54, has worked as a police officer and a lawyer over the course of a diverse career. He started writing essays because he needed the money and he knew he could do it well. He wrote papers for nursing and business students, along with a slew of English-literature essays. His main problem, he says, is that the quality of his papers was too high. "People would come back to me and say, 'It's a great paper, but my professor will never believe it's me,'" says Mr. Parmenter. "I had to dumb them down."

Eventually the low pay forced him to quit. In his best months, he brought home around $1,000. Other months it was half that. He estimates that he wrote several hundred essays, all of which he's kept, though most he can barely remember. "You write so many of these things they start running together," he says.

Both Mr. Parmenter and Mr. Robbins live in the United States. But
the writers for essay mills are increasingly international. Most of the users who log into the Essay Writers Web site are based in India, according to Alexa, a company that tracks Internet traffic. A student in, say, Wisconsin usually has no idea that the paper he ordered online is being written by someone in another country.

Like Nigeria. Paul Arhewe lives in Lagos, that nation's largest city, and started writing for essay mills in 2005. Back then he didn't have his own computer and had to do all of his research and writing in Internet cafes. Now he works as an online editor for a newspaper, but he still writes essays on the side. In the past three years, he's written more than 200 papers for American and British students. In an online chat, Mr. Arhewe insisted that the work he does is not unethical. "I believe it is another way of learning for the smart and hardworking students," he writes. Only lazy students, Mr. Arhewe says, turn in the papers they purchase.

Mr. Arhewe started writing for Essay Writers after another essay mill cheated him out of several hundred dollars. That incident notwithstanding, he's generally happy with the work and doesn't complain about the pay. He makes between $100 and $350 a month writing essays — not exactly a fortune, but in a country like Nigeria, where more than half the population lives on less than a dollar a day, it's not too bad either.

Mr. Arhewe, who has a master's degree from the University of Lagos, has written research proposals and dissertations in fields like marketing, economics, psychology, and political science. While his English isn't quite perfect, it's passable, and apparently good enough for his clients. Says Mr. Arhewe: "I am enjoying doing what I like and getting paid for it."

Write My Dissertation

Some customers of Essay Writers are college freshmen who, if their typo-laden, grammatically challenged order forms are any indication, struggle with even the most basic writing tasks. But along with the usual suspects, there is no shortage of seniors paying for theses and graduate students buying dissertations.

One customer, for example, identifies himself as a Ph.D. student in aerospace engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He or she (there is no name on the order) is interested in purchasing a 200-page dissertation. The student writes that the dissertation must be "well-researched" and includes format requirements and a general outline. Attached to the order is a one-page description of Ph.D. requirements taken directly from MIT's Web site. The student
also suggests areas of emphasis like "static and dynamic stability of aircraft controls."

The description is consistent with the kind of research graduate students do, according to Barbara Lechner, director of student services at the institute's department of aeronautics and astronautics. In an initial interview, Ms. Lechner said she would bring up the issue with others in the department. Several weeks later, Ms. Lechner said she was told by higher-ups not to respond to The Chronicle's inquiries.

The head of the department, Ian A. Waitz, says he doesn't believe it's possible, given the highly technical subject matter, for a graduate student to pay someone else to research and write a dissertation. "It seems like a bogus request," says Mr. Waitz, though he wasn't sure why someone would fake such an order. However, like Ms. Lechner, Mr. Waitz acknowledged that the topics in the request are consistent with the department's graduate-level research.

Would-be aerospace engineers aren't the only ones outsourcing their papers. A student at American University's law school ordered a paper for a class called "The Law of Secrecy." She didn't include her full name on the order, but she did identify one of her two professors, Stephen I. Vladeck. Mr. Vladeck — who immediately knew the identity of the student from the description of the paper — was surprised and disappointed because he tries to help students who are having trouble and because he had talked to her about her paper. Mr. Vladeck argues that a law school "has a particular obligation not to tolerate this kind of stuff." The student never actually turned in the paper and took an "incomplete" for the course.

Essay Writers attempts to hide the identities of its customers even from the writers who do the actual work. But it's not always successful. Some students inadvertently include personal information when they upload files to the Web site; others simply put their names at the bottom of their orders.

Jessica Dirr is a graduate student in communication at Northern Kentucky University and an Essay Writers customer. She hired the company to work on her paper "Separated at Birth: Symbolic Boasting and the Greek Twin." Ms. Dirr says she looked online for assistance because the university's writing center wasn't much help and because she had trouble with citation rules. She describes what Essay Writers did as mostly proofreading. "They made some suggestions, and I took their advice," she says. Unfortunately, Ms. Dirr says, the paper "wasn't up to the level my professor was hoping
Mickey Tomar paid Essay Writers $100 to research and write a paper on the parables of Jesus Christ for his New Testament class. Mr. Tomar, a senior at James Madison University majoring in philosophy and religion, defends the idea of paying someone else to do your academic work, comparing it to companies that outsource labor. "Like most people in college, you don't have time to do research on some of these things," he says. "I was hoping to find a guy to do some good quality writing."

Nicole Cohea paid $190 for a 10-page paper on a Dove soap advertising campaign. Ms. Cohea, a senior communications major at the University of Southern Mississippi, wrote in her order that she wanted the company to "add on to what I have already written." She helpfully included an outline for the paper and wondered whether the writer could "add a catchy quote at the beginning."

When asked whether it was wrong, in general, to pay someone else to write your essay, Ms. Cohea responded, "Definitely." But she says she wasn't planning to turn in the paper as her own; instead, she says, she was only going to use it to get ideas. She was not happy with the paper Essay Writers provided. It seemed, she says, to have been written by a non-native English speaker. "I could tell they were Asian or something just by the grammar and stuff," she says.

James F. Kollie writes a sporadically updated blog titled My Ph.D. Journey in which he chronicles the progress he's making toward his doctorate from Walden University. He recently ordered the literature-review portion of his dissertation, "The Political Economy of Privatization in Post-War Developing Countries," from Essay Writers. In the order, he explains that the review should focus on privatization efforts that have failed.

Mr. Kollie acknowledged in an interview that he had placed an order with Essay Writers, but he said it was not related to his dissertation. Rather, he says, it was part of a separate research project he's conducting into online writing services. When asked if his university was aware of the project, he replied, "I don't have time for this," and hung up the phone.

Policing Plagiarism

Some institutions, most notably Boston University, have made efforts to shut down essay mills and expose their customers. A handful of states, including Virginia, have laws on the books making it a misdemeanor to sell college essays. But those laws are rarely, if ever, enforced. And even if a case were brought, it would be
extremely difficult to prosecute essay-mill operators living abroad.

So what’s a professor to do? Thomas Lancaster, a lecturer in computing at Birmingham City University, in England, wrote his dissertation on plagiarism. In addition, he and a colleague wrote a paper on so-called contract-cheating Web sites that allow writers to bid on students' projects. Their paper concludes that because there is almost never any solid evidence of wrongdoing, catching and disciplining students is the exception.

In his research, Mr. Lancaster has found that students who use these services tend to be regular customers. And while some may be stressed and desperate, many know exactly what they're doing. "You will look and see that the student has put the assignment up within hours of it being released to them," he says. "Which has to mean that they were intending to cheat from the beginning."

What he recommends, and what he does himself, is to sit down with students and question them about the paper or project they've just turned in. If they respond with blank stares and shrugged shoulders, there's a chance they haven't read, much less written, their own paper.

Susan D. Blum suggests assigning papers that can't easily be completed by others, like a personal reflection on that day's lecture. Ms. Blum, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Notre Dame and author of the recently published book My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture, also encourages professors to keep in touch with students as they complete major projects, though she concedes that can be tough in a large lecture class.

But Ms. Blum points out a more fundamental issue. She thinks professors and administrators need to do a better job of talking to students about what college is about and why studying — which may seem like a meaningless obstacle on the path to a credential — actually matters. "Why do they have to go through the process of researching?" she says. "We need to convey that to them."

Mr. Tomar, the philosophy-and-religion major who bought a paper for his New Testament class, still doesn't think students should have to do their own research. But he has soured on essay mills after the paper he received from Essay Writers did not meet his expectations. He complained, and the company gave him a 30-percent refund. As a result, he had an epiphany of sorts. Says Mr. Tomar: "I was like — you know what? — I'm going to write this paper on my own."

THE GLOBALIZATION OF CHEATING

illustration