

SAT Sneak Attack

How Computer Geniuses Hack, Beat and Cheat Americas
Most Feared Exam

by Peter Wayner

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A Party

The kid laughed. Cheating on the SAT is easy, he told me. And then he rolled his eyes a bit. Didn't I know this?

The truth unfolded, as it often does, in a casual aside at the very end of a good party. In the fleeing moments when everyone's guard was down. No one brags about cheating in a job interview. No one just brings it up on a first date. But this was one of those events held at a gorgeous mansion in the horse country of Maryland. The bar was close to empty. People were thinking about maybe, possibly, perhaps going home. If they could only get everyone in the car. Talking about the weather seemed lame.

One guy who came with me wanted a few more minutes to play some video game that he didn't own. Could I wait a minute? So I had a choice. I could stand around gazing at the pictures of the owner riding in a steeple chase. Or I could look at pictures of the owner hanging around with Michael Phelps. Or I could check out the owner rowing in the Head of the Charles. Or I could start talking with a young guy just out of college who was in the same boat. His girlfriend, a genius doctor-type at Hopkins I think, was deep in an argument.

He went to high school at Bronx High School of Science, one of the best public schools in New York City. They let in only the with the highest score on one very difficult exam, a test that many think is even more challenging than the SAT. He was probably a good match for a doctor at Hopkins Med School.

So I needed something to start the conversation. Did he know about the cheating scandal at Stuy, I asked. It was just in the papers.

Bronx is not alone at the top of New York high schools. Stuyvesant High is its elite rival in Manhattan that also chooses

students with an insanely competitive exam. The very best and very brightest kids in New York City go to one of the two schools.

The newspapers were filled with the latest gossip about a cheating scandal that ripped apart Stuy, a scandal that was delicious and well-timed for the fall when seniors and their parents started to fret about college. A smart proctor noticed a student slip a forbidden cell phone into his pocket during the exam and started asking questions. When the talking was over, the school found a ring of more than 60 students who were snapping photos of the exam and debating the answers with text messages. All while the exam was in session. It had all of the elements that made a story irresistible: privileged kids, cheating and new technology.^{1;2;3;4;5;6}

The guy at the party nodded and laughed a bit. Yeah, he told me, it was a pleasure to watch Stuy get nabbed. He loved the scandal just like everyone else.

What did he think about the punishment? Some were suspended but others were just allowed to take the exam again. Wasn't that a bit lenient? Wasn't the school going easy on their little princes and princesses?

Nah, he said. Cheating usually catches up with people. It all averages out, he said.

This was a bit of a surprise to me. I've taught college students at Cornell, Dartmouth and Georgetown. When I was hit by a cheating scandal in my class, I started taking an informal survey of other students and professors before sentencing. When I asked, hypothetically, for an appropriate punishment, the students were uniformly in favor of really cracking down. They wanted justice to be swift, harsh and very painful for the cheaters. It was always the professors who wanted to give someone another break.^{7;8}

This guy was only a few years out of college. Why didn't he feel rooked by the kids at Stuy? Didn't he want them hung naked and upside down in front of the school for all to see? Didn't he want this to go down— cue ominous music— on their permanent record.

He started to get philosophical. The kids were only cheating themselves. The system was still working. Then he said that the courses didn't matter and so the grades weren't that important in the big scheme of life. When you put it in perspective, he said,

who cares about some cheating?

Okay, I said. Perhaps there's some truth to that for the average pop quiz. But what about finals? What about exams that make a big difference in everyone's life like the SATs?

The SATs? He waved them aside. The SATs are easy to cheat on, he told me. Let's go back to Stuy. The kids at Stuy were cheating on something harder. They were cheating on a test at a school with whip-smart teachers, not the average schmoes proctoring the SAT. Anyone could cheat on the SATs. Forget about them, he told me. Let's talk about the way the kids were using their cell phones to cheat at Stuy. Now that shows some brains.

Wait, I insisted. Let's scroll back to the SATs. When I took the SATs they checked IDs and brought in special proctors. It was super-serious and my parents called it the most important exam in my life eighteen hundred times.

How was that possible? Did they implant special chips in their brains? Did they use lasers for signaling each other? Did they use technology?

He laughed at my innocence. I felt like I was the last person on earth to know. Then he told me how anyone could cheat on the SAT today.