On the Ethics of Exam Archives

It has been known for a long time that a number of organizations on Stevens campus maintain what are known colloquially as "test banks," or archival databases of old exams from a variety of courses at Stevens. A small number of them, such as the Stevens Health Professions Club, are publicly available (see http://web.stevens.edu/shpc/SHPCarchives.html). Others are private, often formally or informally maintained by Greek organizations. For many upper level classes where professors do not always return the actual exam paper, instead returning only the answer booklets, it is common that these private archives contain copies or scans of answer booklets, though sometimes they do have copies of the actual exam paper.

It is clear to anyone that access to these exams can create an unfair advantage for a student, particularly when they contain papers in courses where professors cycle exam questions, which based on several cases the Honor Board has handled in the past few years is increasingly common. Because of the inequality of students access to these materials and the means of decentralized archiving now available (Google Drive, Dropbox, et cetera), banning or removing these influences from the classroom outright is nearly impossible. Some means, like repeating a question but changing numerical values somewhat to weed out students who may be copying a solution directly (something the Honor Board has had reported on several occasions), can help somewhat. However, anyone who had access to that same material but instead used it to learn the method of solving a particular problem would not be easily found out, and would still be at an advantage to a student who did not have the example problem as study material. With that in mind, as I see it, there are two possible solutions.

The first approach is what we might call the "closed-access" method. It would require professors to not hand back *any* test materials, minimizing the leak of newer material outwards. It must also be coupled with professors adopting a *tabula rasa* approach to the next cycle of exams – using new and unique questions— thus mitigating the impact of the existing archives. This method is far from ideal for a number of reasons; first off, it inherently limits student feedback on performance, and necessitates a greater investment of professors or TAs time (to go over the exams in person without handing them back). Secondly, it puts the entire onus on the professor to generate new exams and to ensure that there is no leakage of information. Finally, the prevalence of cellular phones, almost unanimously capable of capturing high-resolution images of exam papers or solutions pose a large threat to this method, and would seem to require strict proctoring to overcome.

The second approach is, in contrast, what we might call the "open-access" method. Instead of removing access to prior exam materials, the professors would make the information easily accessible to all students – or, to remove some of the responsibility from the professors, the Honor Board could run a centralized archive to which the professors submit.. A limited version of this method has been used by several professors on campus,   making a few years' worth of past exams available for study material; and a few (most notably Profs. Levine and Brady), have pioneered the wholesale approach, with a database including exams from 20 years ago (See http://personal.stevens.edu/~llevine/). Certainly, this approach does not come without certain drawbacks – the onus on the professor would instead be to ensure that their tests each year   remain relatively fresh, and the 4-5 year question cycle could not be directly used. However, in many classes, mastery of an approach is what is being tested the most, and for that, small changes to the prior questions can yield a valid and fresh exam. For instance, when Professors Levine and Brady teach MA221 or MA227, their tests are relatively similar to the previous exams made available to every student online, yet they still end up with a normal grade distribution.

Particularly for technical courses, where a grading curve can be drastically affected by a small number of students scoring well above average due to prior knowledge of test questions, the impact of test-banks

is very large. A public archive is the most equitable and ethically correct solution – it ensures that there are no advantages to be had illicitly by certain students through private archives, many of which hold material that is assumed by professors to be inaccessible. In essence, by providing every student with all of the possible material, we remove the possibility for certain students to gain an advantage through access to other material.

Whether or not such a system can (or should) be mandatory for all classrooms is a different issue; clearly the system would be most beneficial in the grand sense if every class participated, thus negating the effectiveness of other exam archives and removing the impetus for other organizations to maintain or create their own. It is my humble opinion that it ought to be mandatory. I predict that this would be met with an outcry from the teaching faculty, as may increase their workload with regards to exam writing. However, this seems a small sacrifice compared to the benefits to academic integrity and grade validity at the Institute. Moreover, it is my belief that faculty turn a blind eye to the influence of exam-banks in their classroom, inherently disadvantaging some of their students.

I look forward greatly to your input and opinions on this concept. I hope that if I win your support, we can move forwards to help tackle this complex and long-standing issue, raising Stevens to ever higher levels of academic excellence.

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