

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

FIRST PERSON

Lady Bird's Cheating Problem

By Alice A. Frye

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STILL FROM LADY BIRD (2017) DIRECTED BY GRETA GERWIG. SHOWN: SAOIRSE RONAN (AS CHRISTINE 'LADY BIRD' MCPHERSON).
(©A24/PHOTOFEST)

When I went to see *Lady Bird* I fully expected to enjoy it. I knew people who had and it was the sort of film, by description, I knew I would like. I did not expect to see a movie that presented academic dishonesty as a forgettable, perhaps even laudable, act.

To be clear, I don't expect all good films to have a moral compass or message. I won't be flogging a commentary decrying the lack of just deserts in *A Clockwork Orange*, or complaining that the *Fast and Furious* franchise encourages casual misuse of resources.

But *Lady Bird* is not an amoral film, nor is it a live-action cartoon, fable, or fairy tale. It's a film praised for its realism, and one that repeatedly states its moral beliefs about interpersonal responsibility — loudly and clearly. Many characters — including Christine, the willful, complex, and lovable protagonist — commit numerous transgressions, all of which are judged and/or forgiven over the course of the movie, with one notable exception. Consider:

- Christine lies about her background to make herself feel less insecure, but is found out and socially punished.
- Her gay boyfriend cheats on her, but she shows her good ethics by not taking vengeance and outing him.
- Another boyfriend lies to her, but we are allowed to safely judge him as a jerk, and Christine is hurt but righteously breaks up with him.
- She “decorates” a nun’s car as a prank, and lies about it and is absolved by the amused, understanding nun.
- She cold-shoulders her best friend to improve her social standing with a rich girl, but realizes this is wrong, regrets it, and is forgiven.
- Christine is cruel to her mother but ultimately grasps her mother’s limitations, and feels remorse for lying to her and judging her harshly.

The film exhibits one example after another of interpersonal offenses and offers retributions or resolutions for each — except when it comes to academic cheating.

And Christine cheats. Quite deliberately. She destroys her math records and then lies about her grades to improve her standing. Then she cheats on an exam to continue improving her grade. And it is clear that she is concerned about grades, anxious to get into a good college, and

understands that grades matter. Several scenes show her discussing grades, whether she can get into the college she wants, and so on.

Does being sweet and funny and interesting make cheating OK? Is that what we as faculty members should tell our students?

In short, the cheating is not a trivial act, and she knows it. Yet there is not a single moment in the film in which Christine acknowledges even to herself that it is wrong, or a moment in which she experiences any negative consequence that would suggest that academic dishonesty is, in fact, wrong.

At the end of the movie, she is off to her new life at an exclusive East Coast college, which she has gotten into by cheating, and it seems the new life will give her great insight into herself and her relationship with her mother. So, in fact: Yay cheating! The end.

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THE REVIEW
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As an instructor I'm wondering what to say to my students about cheating after seeing this movie.

Some threads in the film seem to suggest that the cheating is justified: We're shown that Christine is talented and unique, desperate to escape her mother, and that she lacks resources others have. Her rich friend, after discovering that Christine has lied about her background, says she can't imagine having to do that. The implication that rich people don't have to lie — but the rest of us might — is clear. There is a suggestion that her older adopted brother got into Berkeley because he was a minority student, so as a white person Christine lacks that advantage. She has needs but not resources, so cheating is a legitimate response.

Or maybe the cheating is excusable because it demonstrates Christine's ambitiousness. Her peers are content to stay in Sacramento and go to community college, or nearby universities. She wants more from life. She's willing to go to the wall — i.e., cheat — to get it. So we should respect that. Which doesn't sound at all like any politicians currently in office.

Perhaps she doesn't know any better. Which is plausible ... I guess? But there's no suggestion that Christine should have known better, and no indication whatsoever that she has actually done something wrong by cheating.

Maybe the film's failure to deal with her academic dishonesty is a statement about its very seriousness: It is such a violation that it can't be rectified. Certainly there is no easy or subtle cinematic method to resolve it and still have Christine experience her happy ending at the college of her choice. A more thoughtful approach would have allowed the viewer to understand that cheating — the one act in the film that dramatically changes Christine's life — wasn't beyond judgment in this otherwise quite morally conventional film.

Perhaps Greta Gerwig, *Lady Bird*'s writer and director, believes (as many people apparently do) that cheating is a victimless crime, and thereby requires no resolution. Those of us who teach know it is not.

In cheating to gain entrance to an elite college, the Christines of the world take a coveted spot from another student who has worked hard — and honestly — for that opportunity. Cheating is a form of theft, an act of hubris. The cheating student says, above all, "I am more important than other students. I deserve something for free that others have to work for. My burdens are heavier. My needs are more profound."

Perhaps the movie's sequel could show the life of the person whose place at college Christine stole by cheating. Or perhaps we're to presume that it was just another rich kid who had gotten accepted to other elite institutions, so it didn't really matter?

No, I am not a puritan who believes that cheating makes a student evil. Like most teachers, I've dealt with many cases of academic dishonesty over the years. I don't believe it dooms a student. When I discover that students have cheated, I work to understand their motivations, and seek outcomes that neither destroy nor reward them for their actions.

Yet neither do I believe that cheating is trivial, something to be shrugged off, or a sometimes necessary means to an end — as this film suggests.

As instructors, my colleagues and I are in an unending war against cheating, and against the perception that everyone does it and that it doesn't matter. We feel assaulted by the parade of websites that sell increasingly sophisticated fake papers to our students, and the exam banks that students pass on to one another year after year. Cheating seems so common and accepted, it is hard to argue that it matters.

Perhaps I should just tell my students that it doesn't matter. Go ahead, cheat. May the most skilled cheater win.

Look, I know *Lady Bird* is a lovely film. The acting is beautiful, and there are many heartfelt moments. Christine is a compelling and touching character. I've asked myself why can't I just put aside the cheating? Accept it as a flaw that enriches the character? I know some readers will think: "But she was so sweet. So funny and interesting, so talented, so real. The movie was so lovely. And all you saw was the cheating?"

And I would reply: Does being sweet and funny and interesting make cheating OK? Is that what we as faculty members should tell our students?

Because along with all the other messages this film sends about interpersonal growth and responsibility, here is what it concludes about academic dishonesty: If you are talented, funny, smart, lovable, desperate, and ambitious, and if you feel like you have to cheat, well then, by all means, do what you need to do.

I'll be sure to pass that along to my students.

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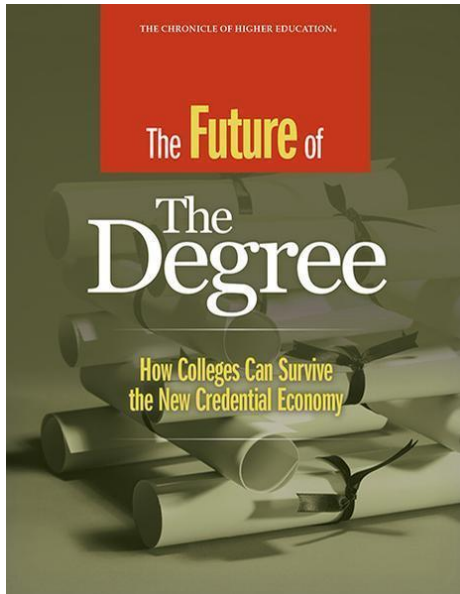
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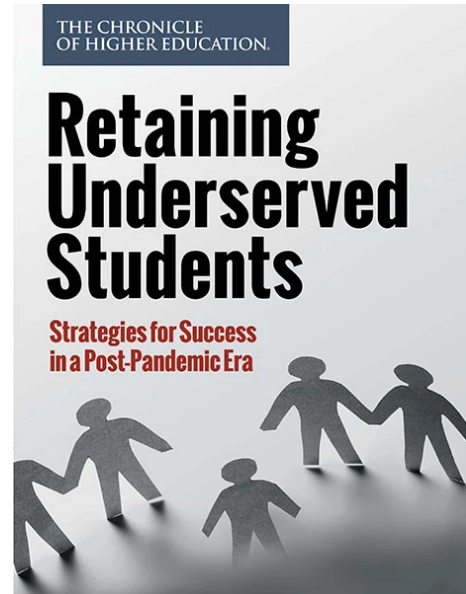
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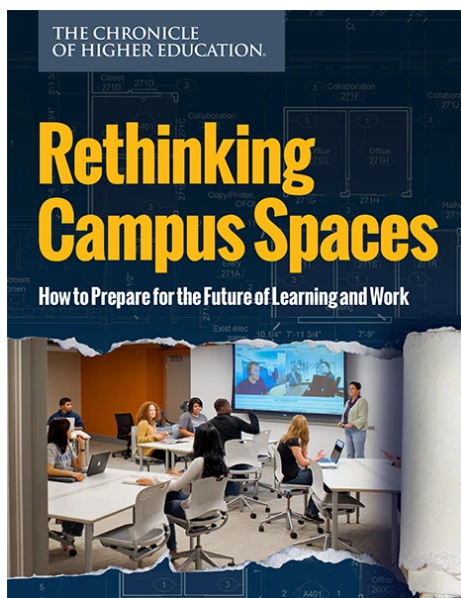
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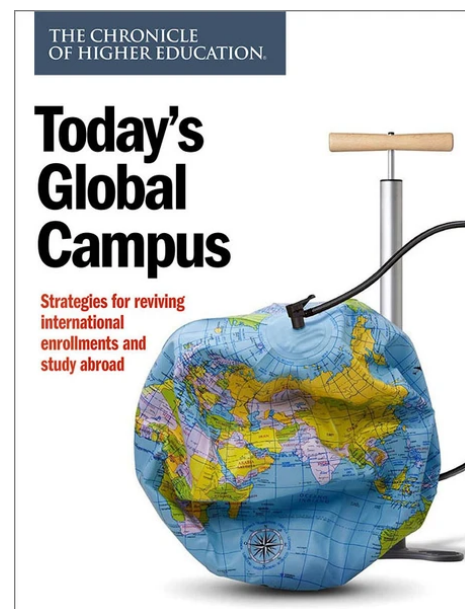
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