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GMAT Scandal Has MBA Students Sweating

Users of the shuttered GMAT test prep site Scoretop are worried about penalties

by [Francesca Levy](#) and [Matthew Lawyue](#)

A lot of business school applicants are suddenly very nervous, but it isn't the usual case of worrying that their application essays won't be up to par. In the week since cheating allegations emerged surrounding Scoretop.com, a now-shuttered preparation site for the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), applicants who used the site have become fearful that their scores will be canceled, they will be banned from retaking the test, or they might even be barred from business school.

That possibility became even more real on July 1 when David A. Wilson, president of the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), which owns the GMAT exam, said that about six months ago GMAC had canceled the score of one individual who had used Scoretop and bragged online about the advantage it gave him. GMAC notified the schools where he was an applicant, but it is unclear what the schools did with the information.

The scandal erupted on June 23, when GMAC disclosed ("[Shutting Down a GMAT Cheat Sheet](#)," BusinessWeek.com, 6/23/08) it had won a legal judgment against the Scoretop site in federal district court in Virginia. GMAC had accused Scoretop of copyright infringement, saying the site had published "live" GMAT questions—questions that were still currently in use by GMAC, the test's publisher—and other copyrighted material. The court awarded GMAC \$2.3 million, plus legal costs, and allowed GMAC to seize Scoretop's domain name as well as a computer hard drive containing payment and other data.

GMAC says the man behind Scoretop, Lei Shi, has left the site's base in Aurora, Ohio, and returned to his native China, where he reportedly has taken refuge in the city of Zibo in Shandong province. Shi, who took the GMAT himself at least three times in 2002 and 2003, could not be reached.

HOW CLEAR WERE THE RULES?

Wilson said that while the organization is examining a seized Scoretop hard drive with about 6,000 user names, he did not know how many would ultimately face having their scores canceled. "We're not interested in the innocent surfer," Wilson said. "If you were actively engaged in providing that information, then you are a target."

For prospective B-school students who have poured time and money into their MBA dreams, the possibility that they've run into problems with the GMAT is crushing. Virtually all U.S. business schools require the GMAT as part of the admissions process, and a large GMAT prep industry, with many legitimate players, has developed around it. (McGraw-Hill, which publishes *BusinessWeek*, also publishes GMAT test material including test preparation books, as does BusinessWeek.com.)

"The GMAT is such a hard test to crack, and everybody wants more questions to practice from," said Priya H, who defended students who used Scoretop on BusinessWeek.com. In a phone interview, she said she is concerned for a friend who used the site to help prepare for the test. "Nowhere in the Web site does it say you would be violating the rules, and if that was the case, why would my friend fall into the trap? It's a great loss to such victims."

Many Scoretop visitors who patronized its VIP service, which allowed students to see "live," or current, GMAT questions for a \$30 subscription fee, have defended their use of the proprietary page, even though a Virginia court ruled last month against Scoretop for copyright infringement. In Web posts, many students argue that they thought the site's questions

were legitimate. "I honestly did not know that any illegal activity was going on," wrote "Lola," on Businessweek.com. "Intent makes a difference in this situation, and the consequences Scoretop users face should be proportional to their actions."

"UNFAIR ADVANTAGE?"

Another poster, "Neha," wrote, "I can say that there were absolutely no so-called live questions." She added: "But overreaction [by GMAC] will kill the careers of a lot of innocent students."

Some students who never used Scoretop say the attention given to the site has caused them to be wary of all test-preparation sites. "It certainly does make me leery of going out there and seeking other alternatives," said Jacob Blasdel, a recent graduate of DePaul University who is currently studying for the GMAT. "Especially with what's come out, I feel pretty limited to only using test prep material approved by GMAC."

Another group of GMAT takers, however, has loudly condemned Scoretop users. Some students who say they didn't use Scoretop allege that the site's users received an unfair advantage for spots at prestigious schools. "It makes me so mad," said Tanya Aidrus, an MBA student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's [Sloan School of Management](#). "There are tons of people who are qualified, and deserve to be here, who were going through the process in a legitimate way and didn't get a spot because of those who were cheating."

STRESSING OUT

Students who discussed the incident in recent days were uniform on one thing—applying to business school is a high-stakes process that can result in attempts to beat the test. "People are so focused on this one score that there's immense pressure. I'm not overly shocked that someone would cheat," said Adam Stout, a student at Carnegie Mellon University's [Tepper School of Business](#). "Especially when they've been groomed by their parents for 20 years to go to a top B-school."

"When you're applying to schools, one of the only things you can control is the GMAT," said MIT student Aidrus. "You can't change much else, which makes you, in many ways, almost desperate to do really well."

On the subject of punishment, students differentiated between those who knowingly cheated and others who trusted Scoretop's disclaimers that the material was original. Students who didn't know they were cheating should be allowed another shot at the test, Stout said. "It's hard to tell the difference between 'retired by,' and 'similar to,'" referring to terms for legitimate variations of test questions.

At any rate, students whose names are on the Scoretop hard drive are now likely to be parsing GMAC's pronouncements in coming weeks as closely as they might have studied sample test questions, hoping they still have an MBA in their future. "GMAC," pleaded one commenter on BusinessWeek.com, "have empathy and please don't ruin careers."

Associate Editor Louis Lavelle contributed to this story

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