

## A Semester With Professor Treport

By Daniel Brower

Many people spent the Spring semester hanging out with friends, and cheering for the deaths of the last snowmen. Personally, in what little free time I had, I tended to retreat to my dorm room, lamenting on my building's lack of air-conditioning in the swelter. It's not as if I couldn't make friends, or that I preferred being alone. I just didn't see the point since I'm only here for a year. I had friends back at my old college, and I still talk to them from time to time, but distance complicates things, especially when you are the only one who's a thousand miles away.

The school pulled my financial aid after I failed some stupid linear algebra class. I swear the professor just didn't know what he was talking about. Point is, I couldn't afford to stay. Thus, my senior year was spent here, at Grensia University, doing my best to get the last of my required courses for my computer science degree. One of these was my second attempt at linear algebra.

I learned about as much in the first half of the semester as I had last time. Eigenvector? I hardly know her. Professor Treport seemed like any other math professor. He was apparently well known for developing proofs for some theorems in the past few years. He wore a suit and carried around a canvas bag that was the same light gray as his curtained hair, which slightly overlapped his bifocals, stolen right off of Harry Potter's face. He explained things at least a slight bit more intuitively, but it was still just a garbled mess of matrices and using some ancient witchcraft to determine  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ . I tried to take notes sometimes, but formulas on my page have a distinct tendency to transform into drawings of Pokémon without me even realizing. I felt

a jolt, not from the graphite Pikachu, as I heard the words “midterm” and “tomorrow” escape Professor Treport’s mouth.

Was it really time for midterms already? I was nowhere near ready. Thankfully, unlike my professor at my old school, Professor Treport at least was kind enough to give us a study guide, with some example problems with solutions, along with some exercises for practice. I never understood the mindset of professors that give non-mandatory work. Ironically, this course is meant for underclassmen, but because seniors get first dibs on classes, and need these classes to graduate, few sophomores and even fewer freshmen get into these classes. I just don’t see why anyone would put in any more work than they need to for a class like this. Don’t get me wrong. I greatly appreciated the study guide, but there is no way I ever see myself doing extra problems just for practice. What’s the point if I don’t get credit for them?

That night, I scanned over the study guide for about 30 seconds, if only to convince myself that I made an effort. My phone rang with the default tone. “Hey, Mom?”

“Hey! How are classes going?” she asked.

“They are fine, I guess.”

“Do you need anything? Do you have enough food?”

“I’m fine.”

“What are you up to?”

“I’m studying for my lin alg midterm,” I lied.

“Oh! That is great to hear. I’m really happy to see you making a real effort. A little goes a long way, you know. I’m sure you will pass this time. I was talking to other parents at your old school, and they also say that that old math teacher you had wasn’t all there. They say he’s got

tenure and just refuses to retire. But I don't want my rambling to keep you from your studies. Call me if you need anything. Love you, bye."

"Love you too, bye."

I was glad to hear from Mom, despite the dread of knowing how much I was letting her down. I could almost see it already, her relentlessly messaging other parents and protesting to the administration that I ought to graduate despite not passing this class. Losing her voice, screaming about how hard I work as tears flood her tomato-colored face. I could see Dad stopping her from hitting someone with her small purse. The thought was unbearable. But what was I supposed to do? I simply could not understand this matrix stuff.

As I went to set my phone down, I got a storm of notifications. It's interesting how phones these days can tell when you are looking at them. A couple of "come back" notifications from old mobile games I never uninstalled, some emails about scholarship opportunities, and then a new chapter of my favorite manga. I read the chapter, and then proceeded to spend that night watching people on YouTube react to the chapter, in addition to taking an online quiz for one of my programming classes. Data structures, finally a topic I understood.

I walked into the lecture hall for my midterm. Professor Treport said it was closed-notes, but there is no way I was passing like that. I sat myself in the far back, right under the cameras, such that they had no way of catching what I was about to do on video. I am not proud of this, but I spent the midterm typing questions onto the phone that rested on my leg. Once I had all the answers filled in, along with the steps, as given by the godsend of a website known as Wolfram Alpha, I discreetly slid my phone back into my pocket, and walked up to the front of the class. I placed my exam onto the stack that already contained about twenty finished exams.

The next class, Professor Treport began speaking with his usual tone akin to a therapist. Granted, I've never been to therapy. I've only seen the depictions of it on TV with the patient lying on a couch crying, and the expressionless therapist saying "tell me more" with their pad and pen in hand.

"Hello, class. I am about halfway through grading your midterms. In seeing some common errors in many of the exams, I will be putting you all into smaller groups based on how you did on the exam. I'll be helping you guys to shore up these common weaknesses in preparation for the final. You all should expect an email in the next few days regarding your group placement and meeting time."

I've got to hand it to him, that's a really cool thing to do as a professor. My email was already in my inbox by the time I got back to my dorm room.

"Hello. You have been placed in Group C. This group meets from 2:00 to 2:50pm every other Tuesday, right after class. These meetings are mandatory, and thus, I have checked all of your schedules and assured that there are no conflicts.

See you then,

Professor Treport"

I considered lying about a conflict, but it was more trouble than it was worth. I'd have to show up, but it was fine. I could just sit in the back and keep my mouth shut. After all, this group is likely all of the people who had near-perfect scores, and thus there wouldn't be a lot to discuss.

I walked into the smaller classroom after class that next Tuesday. This classroom is in an older building, which was in need of drastic renovations. The stairs up to the 2nd floor felt like

they could buckle at any time, but they never did. I was the last to get to the classroom, but I wasn't late. Professor Treport closed the door, and locked it. He gave us a look that said it all. My stomach sank as I realized how screwed I was.

"Welcome, to a discussion about academic honesty, and how important it is," Professor Treport said. I was a mouse in the cage of a snake. All there was left to do was let the fangs sink in. There was no getting out of this.

"The answer is that it isn't all that important," he said.

"I'm sorry, what?" one student asked.

"I know you all cheated on the midterm, and you are not in trouble. Let me explain why I made this group." There it was, a hole in the cage I could slip out of before being noticed by the snake. "But first things first. Do not discuss what happens in these discussions. If asked, make up something believable. We were working on cross products, change of basis, whatever. If the administration finds out about what is happening in this discussion, I get the boot, and I'm taking all of you down with me. All ten of you are seniors, and you need the credit for this class to graduate. What I am getting at, is that I am not condemning your choice to cheat on the midterm. What I will condemn, however, is your choice to do a poor job at hiding it. I will help you all to remedy that." Nobody in the classroom lowered their guard.

"Now. I am going to prove that I know what I'm talking about. Bradley, you wrote formulas on the palm of your hand, did you not? Not the worst method, but it was obvious the way you looked at your cupped hand during the exam. Claire, you..." he continued through all the names in the class until he got to mine. "Will, you hid your phone well, but not having both arms on the table makes anyone suspicious. It didn't take me long to spot you typing something into it."

The pit in my stomach lightened a bit.

“Why would you do this?” Claire asked.

“Cheating effectively is one of the most underrated and underappreciated skills in the workforce. I personally cheated my way through my entire math degree, and never got caught. Does that make me any less qualified to teach math? I don’t think so.” He said.

“How does looking at the smart kid’s answers make you qualified?” Milo asked.

“Hey. I am a master of my craft. It takes a lot of planning, and seamless execution to do what I do. So don’t go comparing me with middle school meatheads.” He said.

We spent the rest of the discussion talking about the three main types of cheating: computational, which is what I did, answer copying, and then obtain and memorize cheating, which is where you get a copy of the exam early, and memorize the questions and answers.

At 2:50, he released us, and emphasized the importance that nobody finds out about this. I walked back to my dorm, really feeling the weight of the bullet I just dodged. But I wasn’t in the clear yet, all it would take is one student reporting this. Mutually-assured destruction is a powerful deterrent though, so I wasn’t too worried.

I walked into the second session two weeks later, the last one in the room again. Professor Treport lectured that to cheat effectively, one must understand the content.

“Why would we cheat if we understood the content?” It was the first question I had asked in any class at this school.

“Well, welcome to the conversation, Will. The thing is that there is a difference between understanding the content and being skilled in the content. If I ask you all what  $306^2$  is, I doubt anyone would be able to spit out the answer quickly, but I’m sure you all know what it means. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Now. The reason I bring this up is because tests change. Say you get a copy of last year’s final. If this year’s final has just one question different, the previous year’s is almost useless if you don’t understand the content. You might answer every question right, but one, and depending on the type of question, it may seem suspicious as to why you couldn’t answer it. This brings us into the main method of cheating I will teach you, which I call Scrape and Verify cheating. In computer science, there is a problem known as P vs NP. What it states is that as far as we know, for many problems, verifying that solutions are correct is far faster than generating a solution. What we are going to be doing is finding ways to get access to answers, and then verify that they are correct. The number one cause of cheaters getting caught is them sharing the same wrong answers as another. Sharing the same right answers, however, is not suspicious at all. Once you verify that an answer is correct, that is when you go through the process to organically get to the answer.

After the class was dismissed, I caught up with Professor Treport. “Hey. I was just wondering. I know you explained why you would do this, but why *do* you do this? Why risk your job for people like me?” I asked.

“I know what it’s like to be in your shoes, to struggle, to feel cheated by the system. People who cheat, people who take shortcuts, it’s not because they want to. Often, it is the only route they have, lest they be left behind. My family was borderline impoverished when I was young, but I showed a lot of promise with math. But the moment I got to calculus, that all shattered. So, in order to not disappoint my parents, who had invested what little they had in me, I made sure that I graduated, no matter what it would take. When you apply for jobs, what you know doesn’t matter to employers. What matters is whether or not you will get the job done. But

institutions like this have convinced companies to take on an elitist hiring method. It is an utter perversion of academia. Knowledge should not be a means to money, it should be something we chase for its own sake. Case in point, this system is built on competition, be the best, or you lose, and that is not fair, because not everyone can be the best. I am trying to give people like us a chance to gain the respect we deserve.” I thanked him for his answer, and walked back to my dorm room, wiping two or three tears from my eyes in the process. I’ve never been the type to cry, and I wasn’t going to start now. I decided to try implementing some of these new tools in my homework. It really didn’t take that long to get the hang of this whole Scrape and Verify strategy. After taking a quick photo of my roommate’s copy of the worksheet (he never procrastinates), I got to work verifying the answers. 2 of them were wrong, and so I had to use Wolfram Alpha again. Though I did start to see a few patterns emerging in the answers. I was starting to develop a strange intuition for how the math actually works.

Two weeks later, I walked into the classroom for our last session before finals. As usual, I was the last one through the door. This session was more of a debrief on the semester, and review of what we learned about the art of cheating. As the session began to wind down, Professor Treport spoke in a far more serious tone than ever before: “So as we wrap things up here, I want to congratulate all of you for your remarkable progress. Regardless of the legitimacy of your assignments, I am proud to say that almost all of you have high enough scores to pass the class guaranteed, even with a zero on the final. Speaking of which, the final, as you guys hopefully know, is this Friday. Now, I know I have been encouraging you guys to improve at your craft, but I would advise you all to not cheat on the final.”

“How come?” I asked.



“Since it is the final exam, admin wants more proctors in the room, not just me sitting at a desk. There are going to be four or five of us walking down aisles, and making sure everything is legitimate. I’m not saying I don’t believe that you guys are capable of cheating under that radar, but it’s just too risky, especially when most of you guys already pass anyway. That make sense?” The classroom collectively nodded.

I was one of the people still on the hook for the final. If I didn’t take it, I’d wind up with a 67 in the class, and thus, would not graduate. After some index card calculations, I determined I would need a 12 to pass, 52 to get a B and a 92 to get an A. I did not like my chances without cheating, but if I were caught... I wouldn’t know how to tell Mom. I had to answer just 3 questions right on the test to get a passing score of 15.

I spent that night reviewing how to calculate determinants, and cross-multiply vectors. At least 2 hours of 3Blue1Brown flooded into my brain as I tried to soak in as much as I could. My notebook filled up with equations and diagrams, and still several Pokémon.

“I’ll take a potato chip, and EAT IT!” I shout to myself, mimicking a scene from my favorite anime as I eat from the Lay’s-branded yellow bag of air.

I woke up after 3 alarms tried and failed. 1 hour before the final. I showered, dressed, and walked to the Dunkin’.

“Could I please have a glazed donut, and a large hot whole milk latte with 2 caramel, 2 french vanilla, and an extra turbo shot?” I was going to need all the energy I could get, and after drinking that full latte in less than 10 minutes, I was ready to kick ass. I left the cafe and took a confident walk to the lecture hall.

The final exam was difficult, especially with the pressure of several exam proctors looking over our shoulders. They looked like they were way happier to be here than they should have. One kid sneezed. Nobody said “God bless you”.

“Five minutes left,” Professor Treport announced. I had only one question left. It was a good thing that I actually understood what an eigenvector was now.

I finished my exam, and turned it in at the front, shooting Professor Treport a nod. He nodded back. I had done it. I was sure that I got at least 4 of the questions right. I was going to graduate.

As I got back to my dorm room, I saw a notification in my inbox. IBM looked at my resume and wants to interview me for an entry level position. “Yes!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. Everything was great. A few minutes later, my RA knocked on my door, and bluntly reminded me that quiet hours are still in effect.

A few days later, as I was leaving to go to marching practice, Professor Treport hailed me over to him. His eyes stared into the back of my skull. Oh crap, I failed, didn’t I?

“Did you cheat on your final?” he asked.

“No. I didn’t put my name in the Goblet of Fire.”

“I’m serious. Did you cheat?”

“Of course not. I didn’t cheat on the final. Wait, does this mean I passed?”

“You did very well.”

“How well?” My heart was racing. I passed! I was going to graduate!

“You got an 85, tied for the 7th highest score in the class.”

“A 85? How?” I was amazed.

“You tell me,” he said.