

## Witness admits selling grades | Testifies in trial of college teacher

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### Document Text

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A man at the center of a community college grade-selling scandal took the witness stand in federal court yesterday and admitted that he not only sold grades but wrote term papers, took tests and helped fabricate the immigration status of Middle Eastern students desperate for a quick degree.

Sam Koutchesfahani -- who also owned the Rancho Santa Fe house where Heaven's Gate cult members committed suicide a year ago -- bragged about the high test scores he was able to earn for students. He told a jury that the term papers he wrote were the best money could buy.

"Of all the tests I took, I averaged 96 percentile," he stated with obvious pride.

When he took exams needed for entry to business graduate schools, Koutchesfahani added: "Stanford requires (a score of) 625. I can bring you 670 to 690."

He said that for students from the Middle East, a degree from an accredited American college is prestigious, but that some who came to him were having trouble because they couldn't speak English. Koutchesfahani, an Iranian, said he'd been helping students by taking tests and writing term papers as far back as 1983.

Koutchesfahani pleaded guilty to tax evasion and fraud two years ago, after admitting that he took up to \$350,000 in bribes from Middle Eastern students between 1989 and 1995.

Last year, the house he rented to cult members became the focus of international horror when authorities discovered 39 dead bodies, many of them draped in purple shrouds, lying on beds in the mansion.

The house was the only connection between the cult and Koutchesfahani, but people who knew him said he was dismayed at his run of bad luck.

Koutchesfahani seemed jovial in court yesterday, where he testified in the trial of Darnell Hayes, who taught marketing, business and computer classes at San Diego Mesa College.

Hayes is accused of taking bribes from more than 30 students for Mesa classes he taught, and of helping them pass examinations he proctored in correspondence courses offered through Ohio University, the University of Oklahoma and Eastern Kentucky University.

Koutchesfahani, who faces a maximum of about four years in prison at a future hearing, hopes to earn a more lenient sentence by helping the government in cases against Hayes and at least three other teachers and counselors in the

grade-selling investigation, which also involved San Diego Community College and Palomar College.

But the man who once billed himself as the owner of Tan Trading and Consultant Group in Rancho Santa Fe may have done himself more harm than good yesterday.

He told jurors he had to quit trying to make a legitimate living because he was so busy "helping" students, and said that his trading company had been designed to circumvent the U.S. embargo against Iran.

The company never got off the ground, he said, adding: "You're damned if you do, damned if you don't. (If it had worked,) I would still be (in court), but maybe for trade violations."

Federal Judge Rudi Brewster, who will decide Koutchesfahani's sentence, was not amused.

After dismissing the jury, he told attorneys the testimony "insults intelligence," and said he had serious concerns about Koutchesfahani's veracity.

Brewster said that under cross-examination by defense lawyer Michael Crowley, Koutchesfahani "stated things, on the record, that I believe are blatantly false."

Crowley has said that Hayes was friends with Koutchesfahani, but that Hayes wasn't involved in any fraud.

Hayes' trial will continue Tuesday in federal court in downtown San Diego.

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#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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