



Plagiarism: An Ounce of Prevention ...

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While student cheating, particularly plagiarism, should be old news to most academic observers, it continues to challenge the integrity of undergraduate and graduate education.

The results of the latest large-scale study by researcher Donald McCabe of Rutgers University¹ are unequivocal about the scope of the problem. Of more than 70,000 undergraduates and 10,000 graduate students surveyed across 83 college campuses in the United States and Canada, 62% of undergraduate and 59% of graduate-student respondents admitted to have engaged in cut-and-paste plagiarism from online sources.

While these percentages may seem disproportionately high, there is reason to believe the actual incidence of student plagiarism is much higher—some students may be reluctant to admit they engage in academically dishonest acts. More importantly, there is some evidence suggesting a significant percentage of students—many of whom may believe they engage in appropriate writing practices—actually plagiarize inadvertently.^{2,3} Thus, given the current state of affairs, there is an urgent need to address this form of misconduct.

Informing students about plagiarism

Ideally, every higher learning institution should provide its students with proper guidance and instruction on issues of academic integrity before students set foot in a college classroom. An increasing number of institutions provide coverage on these important matters during freshman orientation. Not all institutions, however, take these steps. Even for those that do, their instruction and guidance probably varies widely in their ability to deter future academically dishonest activity.

Differences in quality aside, these types of interventions can be made significantly more effective by having each individual instructor reinforce basic principles of academic integrity in the classroom. For example, although general notions of citation and proper attribution are universal across disciplines, there can be differences in how some disciplines acknowledge the work of others. More importantly, even within the same discipline, individual instructors tend to have varied thresholds for what constitutes



an appropriate summary or paraphrase vs. plagiarism.⁴ Consequently, drawing students' attention to these issues in the classroom conveys instructors' individual expectations and, more importantly, sends students a direct and unambiguous message that integrity in scholarly and scientific work is a serious matter.

Academic integrity in the syllabus

Because some courses can differ widely in the types of assignments students must complete, instructors should have a clearly articulated policy that defines cheating and plagiarism, and specific penalties for each type of infraction. The course syllabus is an ideal way to disseminate this information in writing. Regrettably, students sometimes merely gloss over this important document or, if they do read it, sometimes forget important details about key requirements of a given course. For these reasons, it is useful to review the academic integrity policy again before the first exam.

Similarly, the plagiarism section should be reviewed one or two weeks before a written assignment is due. This way, instructors' expectations of scholarly integrity remain fresh in the students' minds as they prepare to write their first course assignments. One important point to keep in mind is for instructors to ensure their definitions and penalties for infractions are consistent with those of the institution. It is equally important for instructors to be thoroughly acquainted with official procedures for handling cases of academic dishonesty.

For example, institutions that operate within a traditional honor code will likely have judicial procedures that are substantially different from those found at colleges and universities that do not have such codes. Thus, when an act of academic dishonesty is observed, the penalty for the infraction may be decided by the honor code committee, rather than by the instructor, as might be the case in schools that do not have an honor code.

Plagiarism policies as instructional tools

Too often, students' knowledge of academic integrity is derived solely from institutional policies or from policy statements found in course syllabi. Unfortunately, this type of guidance often limits its coverage of plagiarism to merely defining this type of lapse and cautioning students against the practice.^{5,6} In the absence of further



instruction, this simplistic approach is probably ineffective.^{7,8} In fact, I find that most students seem to know what plagiarism is and know that misappropriating others' work is wrong.

Evidence shows, however, that many students—and even some instructors—fail to realize plagiarism can manifest itself in a variety of subtle forms. Some of these forms, which may be quite acceptable to some people, are embedded in the way they write. For example, the results of one of my studies suggest that some students believe as long as a citation is provided, one can (mis)appropriate verbatim portions of others' text without quotations.⁹ A similar observation has also been made in a small number of college professors¹⁰ and even in physicians.¹¹

Thus, clarification on the proper use of footnotes, citations, quotations and related attribution issues should be an essential element of instruction on avoiding plagiarism.

The importance of instruction in deterring plagiarism is underscored by recent studies that demonstrate its effectiveness.¹²⁻¹⁵ One of the biggest areas of concern is the problem of paraphrasing, particularly when the text to be paraphrased is technical and, therefore, difficult to read. For many written assignments, students are expected to analyze and synthesize information from various sources. The resulting product is supposed to represent a condensed summary of the material that has been synthesized from the sources that were consulted, and it should be written in the students' own words. But, some inexperienced writers—especially those with a poor command of the language—may rely on paraphrasing from their sources rather than attempting to summarize their key contents.

In far too many cases, their paraphrasing strategies may retain so much verbatim text from the original source that they represent instances of plagiarism. This latter point has been expounded in a study in which student participants were asked to paraphrase to the best of their ability without using direct quotations.¹⁶ One group had an easy-to-read paragraph whereas another group had one that was more difficult to read. As expected, many students tended to misappropriate some text from the original paragraph. Those students who had the difficult-to-read paragraph misappropriated significantly more text than those who were given the easy-to-read version.



Instructional materials

Developing effective instructional materials on plagiarism can be time consuming, and coverage of these basic concepts takes away precious class time, particularly at the graduate level. Given the high incidence of plagiarism in higher learning institutions, however, there is an urgent, ethical obligation to address the problem in every classroom. Fortunately, there are free, online tutorials on avoiding plagiarism that are accessible to anyone with an internet connection.

For college students, including first-year graduate students, one excellent site hosted by Indiana University is available at www.indiana.edu/~istd. Another good site is hosted by the University of Southern Mississippi at www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/plagiarismtutorial.php. Surely, other similarly useful resources exist or are currently under development.

For graduate students, particularly those in the sciences, I've prepared an online resource on avoiding plagiarism and other unethical writing practices that is hosted by the U.S. Office of Research Integrity: <http://ori.dhhs.gov/education/products/plagiarism>.

Graduate education implications

Research shows that, relative to professors, undergraduates hold tolerant attitudes toward cheating.¹⁷ If not corrected, these attitudes are likely to be carried over into graduate school and very possibly into professional practice. Certainly, evidence indicates plagiarism among graduate students is a growing concern,¹⁸⁻²⁰ and scholars' and scientists' plagiarism has become so troublesome among editors that many publications now rely on software to catch potential offenders.²¹

Therefore, it is critical that effective instruction on avoiding plagiarism be offered at the graduate level. This is especially important given the high proportion of graduate students who are not native English speakers and writers, and who may come directly from educational systems in which plagiarism is not given the level of importance accorded to in Western scholarly traditions. Moreover, instances of cheating at the graduate level can be costly to students, their professors and even their institution. For example, consider the plagiarism scandal that occurred at Ohio University's School of Mechanical Engineering. An investigation revealed more 30 theses, including at least one doctoral dissertation, were found to contain unattributed verbatim text from other



sources. The theses' advisors were faulted for failure to properly supervise the students.^{22, 23}

Good scholarly writing takes time and considerable effort to produce, particularly when the subject matter is technical in scope and when the writer does not have a full command of the language. These and other factors—for example, procrastination over academic assignments—are likely to increase students' tendencies to misappropriate others' works, particularly if they have not received adequate instruction on academic integrity issues.

Having a comprehensive academic integrity policy and raising students' awareness of the seriousness of these malpractices, along with vigorous anti-plagiarism instruction, can inoculate students against the urge to plagiarize. Perhaps such ethical consciousness-raising efforts can extend to other areas of personal and professional practice.

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