

For Faculty: Reducing and Detecting Plagiarism

Faculty play a crucial role in helping students to develop academic integrity. There are many contexts in which faculty can explicitly teach students what academic honesty is: at the beginning of the semester when they are setting the tone for learning; as the requirements for an assignment are described; when students must be confronted with the evidence of dishonesty; and as they model integrity in their own teaching and scholarship. In all instances, it is important that expectations for academic integrity are communicated explicitly, clearly, and regularly.

Why Students Plagiarize

In order to teach students how to avoid plagiarizing, it may be helpful to understand some of the reasons that increase the tendency to plagiarize. Students may:

- ▶ *Lack the time to complete an assignment well* (Wilhoit, 1994). This may occur as the result of
 - poor time management (Oliphant, 2001b),
 - perfectionism,
 - procrastination (Tamashiro, 1998), or
 - circumstances beyond the student's control.

- ▶ *Feel pressure to do particularly well on the assignment* (Wilhoit) *or in the course*. This pressure may be caused by
 - the weight assigned to a particular writing task,
 - family who only want the student to maintain a high grade-point average,
 - personal expectations to perform well, or
 - competition for entrance to graduate school or for scholarships (Oliphant).

- ▶ *Believe that they do not have the skills necessary to complete the assignment*. Depending on the assignment, "skills" may involve
 - searching for relevant articles,
 - evaluating internet sources (Oliphant),
 - understanding technical terms (Roig, 1999),
 - knowing and being able to use a particular citation style (Oliphant), or
 - knowing how to take careful notes when reading sources (Harris, 2000; Wilhoit; Williams, 1996).

- ▶ *Come from cultures where imitating another writer is a form of flattery* (Oliphant) *or where intellectual property—the legal concept that a person can "own" an idea—is inconceivable* (Bowden, 1996).

- ▶ *Not understand important information about acknowledging sources properly, like:*
 - the differences between plagiarizing and paraphrasing,
 - the details of citing correctly,
 - the legal differences between common knowledge, public domain, and intellectual property, or
 - the fact that electronic and online sources are not necessarily public domain or common knowledge (Oliphant).

Reducing the Incidence of Plagiarism

Although it may not be possible to eliminate plagiarism, it is possible for faculty members to educate their students and construct assignments in such a way that plagiarism is greatly reduced. Some strategies for accomplishing this goal are described below.

- ▶ *Educate yourself about plagiarism*, especially the circumstances under which students are likely to plagiarize (Harris, 1999), so that you can teach students how to avoid plagiarism and can create assignments that reduce the temptation to plagiarize.

- ▶ *Include a statement about plagiarism as defined by your discipline and its consequences in each course syllabus* (Academic Dishonesty; Harris; Hinchliffe; Murray, 2002; Oliphant, 2001a), as well as sources to which students can go for additional information on the Web.

- ▶ *Have students sign a statement*, affirming that they have read and understand the College's policy and procedures regarding plagiarism and agree to abide by them. This underscores the importance of avoiding plagiarism, and the public commitment of signing the statement makes it more likely that students will not plagiarize intentionally.
- ▶ *Reserve a session early in each course to educate or review with your students what plagiarism is, why it is unacceptable in a Christian, scholarly community, and how to avoid it in their work* (Academic Dishonesty; Oliphant).
 - Present specific strategies they can use to avoid plagiarism, and inform students of the consequences if they plagiarize (Academic Dishonesty; Hinchliffe, 1999; Oliphant; Van Belle, nd).
 - Let students know that you check their work for plagiarized sources (Murray) and that you are aware of and familiar with the papers that are presented at paper mill web sites (Ehrlich, 1998; Leland, 2000; Van Belle).
 - Present reasons for citing sources properly (Harris; Leland; Murray; Oliphant; Williams):
 - Plagiarizing is immoral and illegal (Saupe, 1998; Standler, 2000; Student Judicial Affairs, UCD, 1999). It is a form of theft, fraud, and lying (Saupe; Standler; Student Judicial Affairs, UCD).
 - An argument is strengthened when citations of authoritative sources are used (Harris; Williams).
 - A student avoids learning how to research effectively and to write well when he or she plagiarizes (Saupe; Student Judicial Affairs, UCD).
 - Those who plagiarize tarnish the reputation of the academic institution and degrade the value of their education if that institution becomes known as a place where students can plagiarize with impunity (Saupe; Student Judicial Affairs, UCD).
 - Plagiarizing creates an atmosphere of suspicion among classmates and between professor and students that weakens the learning community (Student Judicial Affairs, UCD).
 - When one student plagiarizes, he or she gains unfair advantage over classmates (Student Judicial Affairs, UCD).
- ▶ *Teach students the skills they need* in order to complete assignments successfully.
 - Schedule a class session with a reference librarian to teach students about the resources available in the library and how to carry out their research using those resources (Oliphant, 2001b).
 - Present detailed information on how to cite sources properly and accurately in your discipline (Oliphant; Wilhoit).
 - Encourage or require students to take careful notes from their sources (Ehrlich; Wilhoit). Explain how to do this effectively.
 - Break large assignments down into a set of smaller assignments (Ehrlich; Harris; Murray; Oliphant; Van Belle). For instance, rather than a term paper due at the end of the semester, have students first develop a list of possible thesis statements; then a set of notes from their sources; then a bibliography that addresses their chosen thesis; then an outline; then a first draft, etc. This process not only reduces the likelihood of plagiarizing, but it also models a strategy for accomplishing large tasks—and results in higher quality papers.
 - Require multiple drafts of students' assignments (Wilhoit). Besides discouraging students from complete plagiarizing, this also models your expectation that writing involves more than one draft and shows that this can result in a higher quality product (Wilhoit).
 - Have students write their drafts or portions of their drafts in class, bring drafts or notes to class for peer evaluation, or require that drafts be turned in with the final paper (Ehrlich; Leland; Van Belle).
- ▶ *Create assignments that help to reduce the potential for plagiarizing.*
 - Have students download a paper from a paper-mill site and evaluate its weaknesses (Leland; Oliphant). This shows students what poor writing is and that you are not impressed with the quality of these papers (Leland).
 - Discuss hypothetical situations of interactions between students and how students might gather and use information during the research and writing process (Wilhoit). Explain when "sharing" information is appropriate and when it is inappropriate.

- Present properly and improperly paraphrased, quoted, and cited statements and have students evaluate whether and why the sources are properly acknowledged (Wilhoit).
 - Develop assignments that students will be interested to complete (Leland).
 - Develop a list of topics on which students can write that you can rotate through over a number of years (Oliphant; Van Belle). This helps to reduce "borrowing" of previous students' papers over the semesters.
 - Create assignments or sets of readings that are unique to the course and specific in their requirements in order to reduce the possibility of plagiarism, especially complete plagiarism (Harris; Leland; Oliphant; Van Belle). For instance, have students answer certain questions in their writing or require a certain combination of sources (e.g., 2 internet sources, 3 peer-reviewed articles, and one case study) or require recent citations (say, within the last 3-5 years).
 - Build in "oral reports" based on students' papers (Harris). Students present summaries of their papers, and have to explain what they meant by various terms and phrases that they used, describe where they obtained their sources and summarize those sources' main points, and read some of their paper aloud. This procedure may also provide information about whether a student has plagiarized (Ehrlich; Harris).
 - Have students write an essay, after they have turned in their papers, about the paper and the researching and writing process (Harris). They can describe what they learned, problems they encountered, and how they solved them; what they would do differently next time; and the directions in which they would go if they continued their work. This assignment may also provide information about whether a student has plagiarized by providing a writing sample that can be compared to the paper itself (Harris).
 - Consider the use of group projects or presentations rather than traditional writing assignments (Van Belle).
 - When cooperative learning activities are used or collaboration is allowed, communicate clearly regarding proper and improper cooperation and collaboration and how students are expected to contribute to the project (Wilhoit).
- ▶ *Make a copy of the first page of each writing assignment of every student* (Harris). This provides a record of a student's progress over the semester as well as providing writing samples against which one may compare an assignment where plagiarism is suspected.
 - ▶ *Require that students turn in copies of their sources with their written assignment* (Oliphant; Roig, 1999; Wilhoit). Roig also suggests that students be required to highlight the cited text in their sources.
 - ▶ *Require or encourage students to use plagiarism detection software* like Turnitin.com, Glatt's Plagiarism Services, WordCHECK, KeyWORD, or MOSS before turning in their final drafts.

Detecting Plagiarism

Just as a faculty member has a responsibility for evaluating student writing and providing suggestions for how students can improve, he or she also has a responsibility for evaluating whether students are citing sources properly and accurately. The following are possible strategies for helping in this latter task:

- ▶ *Check for clues that the paper was downloaded from the Web* (Bates & Fain, 1999; Harris, 1999):
 - dates or web site URLs in small print in the corner of each page (Bates & Fain; Harris; Hinchliffe; Senechal).
 - a "tag line" on the last page (Bates & Fain; Senechal) indicating who the author or the sponsoring organization is.
 - inconsistent or inappropriate formatting (Bates & Fain; Hinchliffe; Oliphant, 2002; Senechal). If a paper is downloaded and reprinted, the headings, manuscript page headers, and page numbers may not be formatted correctly or consistently.
- ▶ *Search possible sources for exact phrases used in the paper that are distinctive* (Ehrlich; Harris, 1999; Hinchliffe; Leland; Oliphant; Ryan, 1998).
 - If Web citations are used, go to those sources and search the page for phrases that the student has used.
 - Use a search engine like AltaVista, Google, Lycos, or HotBot to check the Web. If the phrase isn't found with one search engine, try one or two other search engines since each searches a different set of web sites

- and pages.
 - Search the relevant on-line data base of abstracts or full-text articles.
 - Check highlighted or underlined portions of the students' print sources to see if they have been incorporated into the assignment and cited properly.
- ▶ *Check for clues that the paper was:*
- obtained from an unacknowledged source (Bates & Fain; Senechal).
 - Look for "references to graphs, charts, or accompanying material" that are missing.
 - Check for "references to professors, classes or class numbers that are not taught at" Westmont.
 - Check whether all or many sources are in another language or published in another country.
 - Look for inconsistencies in the relevance of information, writing style, or grammar (Bates & Fain; Harris; Oliphant; Senechal).
 - written at an earlier time (Bates & Fain; Hinchliffe; Oliphant; Senechal).
 - "Web sites listed in citations" are no longer available.
 - Most or all of the "citations. . . are older than five years."
 - "Historical persons or events" are described in the present tense.
- ▶ *If the student seems unfamiliar with sources used or information in the paper* (Bates & Fain; Ryan), this may be an indication that the information is plagiarized.
- He or she "cannot identify citations or provide copies of the cited material."
 - He or she "cannot summarize the main points of the paper or answer questions about specific sections of the paper."
 - "When provided with a page from their paper that has words or passages removed, students cannot fill in the blanks with the missing words or with reasonable synonyms."
- ▶ *Use plagiarism detection software* like Turnitin.com, Glatt's Plagiarism Services, WordCHECK, KeyWORD, or MOSS.

If plagiarism is detected, the professor should follow the procedures described in the Westmont plagiarism policy for providing evidence, and documenting and reporting incidents of plagiarism. Following these procedures will help to provide a safeguard against legal risk.

Sources

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