

Advice: Plagiarism, it's serious

Plagiarism is a significant problem confronting everyone in higher education; it is a serious offense and, for a variety of reasons, it is getting more common. The availability of the internet makes it very, very easy to “lift” ideas, words, paragraphs, pages and more, and then paste it almost without thinking. Please note that the internet also makes it easier to find when someone has plagiarized. Many high schools and undergraduate programs do not prepare students with definitions, examples, or even an awareness of the problem. In the dark ages, I learned this first in high school and it was drummed into my head more in college. Perhaps things have changed now; I suspect it's possible to graduate from some universities without ever even writing a paper. As a Teaching Assistant at Indiana U several decades ago, I remember undergraduate students blatantly copying from the textbook when writing papers; they had no clue that it was plagiarism, or that it was/is wrong. It is important that EVERY STUDENT EDUCATE THEMSELVES ABOUT PLAGIARISM, IGNORANCE, ESPECIALLY FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS, IS NOT A DEFENSE (see some sources below).

Undergraduates, graduate students, and even faculty have been found to have plagiarized materials. (For examples go to the MSU student paper, the State News, <http://www.statenews.com/>, and search on “plagiarism.”) Plagiarism contaminates term papers, theses, dissertations, written comprehensives, articles, reports, and even books. The focus of these pages is advice to students, primarily graduate and prospective graduate students. Let me start with some examples to show just how serious the problem is.

A random selection of student punishments for plagiarism across diverse universities. (quoted from each university's website, 2011)

Stanford:

Is there a standard for punishment for plagiarism or is it done on an individual basis?

The standard penalty for a first-time violation of the Honor Code is a one-quarter suspension and 40 hours of community service. If the student is in his/her final quarter of enrollment the standard practice is to convert the one-quarter suspension into a two-quarter delay in the conferral of the degree.

University of Leeds, UK:

There are a range of penalties that can be applied in cases of plagiarism. The penalty is chosen either by the School or the Committee on Applications and will depend on the seriousness of the offence and on whether there are any mitigating circumstances.

Example penalties are:

1. Only the sections of the assignment determined not to be plagiarised are marked.
2. Assignment is resubmitted for zero marks.
3. Academic year is failed and must be retaken.
4. Student is excluded from the University.

Colorado State University:

The penalties for plagiarism depend upon the degree of gravity. Should you be found guilty, the least is an "F" on a paper. Failing an entire course is also possible and, in cases where the charges are graver, expulsion from the university.

Baylor University:

As the quotation at right demonstrates, intentional plagiarism is a clear-cut matter at Baylor. Teachers turn in any students they believe have willfully plagiarized. The Honor Council hears each case, and students found guilty suffer these consequences:

- 1) They receive a 0 on the work in question.
- 2) They are suspended, most often for two or three days. The length depends largely on the student's behavior before the Honor Council; truthfulness and contrition are appropriate when the evidence is compelling. Ordinarily the student misses a day of school for the first day of suspension (and receives a 0 on all work that day). Remaining days are "reverse suspension"; students serve these during the next vacation.
- 3) Students who are convicted of plagiarism also receive specific final warning and will suffer expulsion if they are convicted of a further honor offense.

"at Baylor, as at other academic institutions, intentional plagiarism is an honor offense, and teachers turn in to the Honor Council any student whose work they believe to be dishonest."

--The B Book: A Handbook for Students and Parents

The penalties for unintentional plagiarism are not quite as clear-cut. A teacher may assign plagiarized work an academic penalty (most often a 0) but not send the author of that work to the Honor Council if the teacher is convinced--given the age of the student, the nature of the offense, and the scope of the offense--that the student did not intend to plagiarize. For example, if a younger student, in taking notes, failed to quote a six-word phrase and that phrase ended up in his or her essay without quotation marks but with the source cited, a teacher might conclude that the student had been careless rather than intentionally dishonest.

University of Manitoba, Canada:

There is no rule about which penalties are applied for which offenses, but there are patterns in the ways that penalties have been applied in the past. Patterns are not rules, and instructors, departments and deans are free to depart from them.

Less severe penalties: (The following refers to undergraduate students in non-professional faculties. As you progress through your studies penalties tend to become more severe.)

- reprimand.
- requirement that the student repeat and resubmit the assignment, or
- a failing grade in the assignment.

One or more of these penalties is usual in case the offense is a first offense, the offense could have been a mistake (for instance, an error in documenting sources in an essay), and/or there is no very good reason to believe the student intended to deceive.

Failure (F). This is the normal penalty when the offense is probably intentional and is a first offense. Often a failing grade is given resulting in an F - CW . The CW notation means F due to compulsory withdrawal in that course.

Severe penalties apply if there is evidence of planning or involvement of others in the offense. Suspension for one year or more is typical for a student who was previously found guilty, even if the offense resulting in suspension is less serious.

*Often **suspension** due to a disciplinary matter results in a **transcript notation**. After serving the suspension, a student may make a request in writing to the Director of Student Records that this notice be removed.*

Expulsion, unlike suspension, is deemed to be permanent. Expulsion appears to be reserved for very serious cases which may also involve criminal prosecution.

Criminal prosecution is reserved for criminal acts, such as fraud, forgery, theft and impersonation.

Discussion

You will note that there is usually a range of penalties but even the slightest will set you back. For graduate students, even a penalty at the low end of the scale, a grade of 2.0 or 0.0, will put most graduate careers in a deficit position dropping your average below the magic 3.0. You really don't want this to happen.

Here at MSU the "instructor of record" may issue an Academic Dishonesty Report, which will report "Misconduct Types" such as:

"Academic Misconduct on a Quiz, Test, Midterm, or Final Exam"

"Academic Dishonesty on any other Assignment"

"Falsification of Academic Records"

"Falsification of Data or Results"

“Plagiarism”

“Unauthorized Collaboration”

Then the “instructor of record” will pick from “Penalty Types.” The instructions say “*Check all that apply;*” so clearly more than one of these may result.

“Reduce Grade – Assignment”

“Reduce Grade – Quiz/Test”

“Reduce Grade – Midterm/Final Exam”

“Reduce Grade – Course”

“Failing Grade – Assignment”

“Failing Grade – Quiz/Test”

“Failing Grade – Midterm/Final Exam”

“Failing Grade – Course”

Issuing any of these may trigger an action by the Graduate School that is beyond the control of the faculty member and the Department where the infraction took place. You should also note that repeated penalty grades, from different faculty members, will establish a pattern. In this situation the administration can impose a penalty beyond that which the different professors have applied. The administration may prevent the student from registering as well as demanding other actions (such as writing papers or attending workshops).

Where to look

Ok, now you know it is a very serious infraction and you don't want it to happen to you; but just what is it and what should you be doing? I suggest you first look at the Graduate School's site:

<http://grad.msu.edu/researchintegrity/resources/plagiarism.aspx>.

Here you'll find some fairly painless materials to enhance your understanding; eg. a PowerPoint, .pdf, and video. The Provost's office has more on definitions and more connections to other sites:

<http://fod.msu.edu/oir/ClassManagement/integrity-plagiarism.asp>

Further advice for avoiding these situations can be found around the web; for example, my *alma mater* has a useful downloadable document here:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/sources/>

The one from Duke offers a tutorial that's worth the time and effort:

<https://plagiarism.duke.edu/>

This Indiana University site is pointed to by many other universities:

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>

The information is out there; please, make sure you understand what to do and what not to do.

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