



The Plague of Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Academic cheating, including buying term papers, went on long before the invention of the Internet or the World Wide Web.

There have always been students who have found ways to cheat on exams or to buy term papers from other students. The cheaters may even have purchased them from companies advertising in a local college paper or on bulletin boards around campus. Fraternity brothers or sorority sisters have sometimes shared papers. Some wealthier students have paid poorer, but brighter, students to do work for them. A glaring low-tech example occurred in the case of Wal-Mart heiress, Elizabeth Paige Laurie, who had to return her B.A. degree in communications in 2005, when ex-roommate Elena Martinez revealed to *20/20* news magazine that Ms. Laurie had paid her \$20,000 to do three term papers and numerous homework assignments [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-10-19-wal-mart-heiress_x.htm].

Nonetheless, the Internet and the World Wide Web have made academic dishonesty considerably easier and faster. It is simpler than ever before to find other people's words on a topic and pass them off as your own with a simple copy-and-paste maneuver. Students often don't think their teachers can or will try to verify their work using the Internet. The Web has also made it easier to find just the right (or should we say just the *wrong*) company to use for getting term papers done for you. The options have increased vastly with the rise of the Internet. When we started looking for sources, the huge number of Web sites we found were mind boggling and, in some cases, mind-numbing! It almost makes you lose hope when you read that any type of paper you want could be purchased either off the shelf or even custom-ordered — and that even includes dissertations.

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Many sites offer off-the-shelf and ready-to-go term papers. These are, of course, the cheapest ones available and, of course, the easiest ones for your professor to catch. If the professor has given the same assignment before, they may have even read this exact paper or have already identified it as a plagiarized work. Professors these days can run papers against antiplagiarism software. More difficult is catching those who can afford to buy customized term papers. While anti-plagiarism software can detect what it knows about, it has a much harder time detecting what it does not know. Truly customized research papers could be

difficult, if not impossible, to detect through antiplagiarism software.

That does not mean that smart faculty can't catch even those who buy customized term papers. To ensure that students actually do their own term papers, professors can ask to see the term paper outline and monitor the various steps in writing the paper along the way. A professor could require printouts of the research articles the students are using, verifying that the students have tapped content from the databases to which their school or college library subscribes.

To ensure that the students use high-quality information when writing a term paper, professors might require students to find credentials for the authors of Web sites they cite. Figuring out who authored Web content, their backgrounds, motivations, or points of view may constitute a good lesson in critical thinking in itself. Teaching students how to critique the quality of Web sites and evaluate the quality and accuracy of information will help them in their post-academic futures. Hopefully, they can develop the skills to examine Web content more critically and to avoid sites with suspect information.

At our university, a first offense at plagiarism is treated as an opportunity to educate students about how to properly cite someone else's work. When students learn that quotation marks around someone else's words and a footnote giving where you got the quotation from constitute a legitimate and essential part of the research process, they learn the on-the-level way to use the words of others to help make a point and how to avoid plagiarism: It's not plagiarism if you give the author and researcher proper credit.

Villains and Suckers

Most annoyingly, some of these term paper mill Web sites such as OtherPeople's Papers [<http://www.oppapers.com/12064/categories/English>] talk rather badly about libraries and research in general. Look at this promotional language: "After wasting countless hours at libraries, bookstores, and online, I finally realized that it was easier and cheaper to have a research model provide the information I needed." —Bob S...." Well, yes, indeed, Bob S., it is much easier to have someone else provide the information that you need, but what have you then learned from the experience? The purpose of going to school and learning seems to have escaped Bob S.

More disconcerting, many of these Web sites claim dissertations can be done for you. Some Web sites claim that — for an additional fee, of course — all the articles that the real author used in writing the dissertation and doing the research can be sent to you. Even

The Size of the Problem

According to Donald McCabe of the Center for Academic Dishonesty at Duke University, who has surveyed more than 50,000 students about cheating since 1990, the problem is indeed growing. In 1999 he surveyed 2,100 students on 21 campuses and 75 percent admitted that they had cheated at some level in college during the past year. In 1999, 10 percent of the students McCabe surveyed said they had plagiarized off the Internet, but by the 2001 survey, 41 percent said they had plagiarized off of the Internet (Toosi, Nahal, "Internet gives rise to a bold new era in college student cheating," Knight-Ridder Tribune News Service, Washington: Jan. 21, 2004, p. 1). The Internet and the Web are not totally at fault, but clearly the ease of access to what appears to students as good, credible, and undetectable information has helped fuel a dramatic increase.

For more on the subject, we suggest you read an article by Constance R. Campbell, Cathy Owens Swift, and Luther Denton, "Cheating goes hi-tech: Online term paper mills," *Journal of Management Education*, vol. 24, no. 6, December 2000, pp. 726-740.

if true, it still seems hard to imagine how someone expects to be able to defend dissertations for which they haven't done the research or the writing, even if they take the time to read all the articles supplied by these companies.

The real horror, though, is imagining what kind of professor someone who has purchased their dissertation will make. How will they be able to write original research articles in the future to get tenure? Will they

So how easy is it to buy a custom-written paper? Shockingly simple. With an Internet connection and a credit card and you, too, could be a proud recipient of a term paper, research paper, master's thesis, or even a doctoral dissertation, including a bibliography or works cited list. You can purchase a college admissions essay to help you start your student career and go right on through to law or medical school. A simple Yahoo! search using the words "Research Papers

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continue to have someone else write their journal articles for them? How can they teach when they do not have a deep understanding of their field? If they go to work in companies, how well will they be able to do research and write coherent reports for their bosses? And as for the lack of integrity, well ...

Academic Hoaxers on the Rise

Many of us talk to our students about plagiarism and incorporate warnings into our bibliographic instruction sessions. Colleges and universities have begun investing in subscriptions to iParadigm's anti-plagiarism Turnitin.com service, but professors still need to remember to use it. Our institution has an agreement with Turnitin, but in talking to professors, we found that not all of them even knew about the service. While services such as Turnitin have made plagiarism more difficult for students, the number of cases of academic dishonesty is still on the rise.

Specifically, Internet plagiarism has risen. In the past, students would buy old term papers from fellow or former students. Well, that business has changed with the new millennium. The business of selling custom-written papers on the Internet is booming. And these are not your father's paper mills in which papers were passed around and recycled to many students. These are papers written to your specifications of topic, length, and number of works cited — papers that may fly under the Turnitin.com radar. Just recently, as a test, our student newspaper, *The Daily Sundial*, purchased a custom paper from one of these sites and ran it through Turnitin. The paper passed through undetected (<http://media.sundial.csun.edu/media/storage/paper862/news/2006/12/14/News/Cheating.And.Plagiarism.Rampant.On.College.Campuses-2551769.shtml?source=domain=sundial.csun.edu&MIIHost=media.collegepublisher.com>).

Twelfth Night" produced almost a quarter of a million results and numerous sponsored businesses. With names like echeat (It's not Cheating, it's Collaborating, <http://www.echeat.com>) and OPPapers.com (Other People's Papers, the New and "Untouchable"), it was pretty obvious which sites were sellers.

Most of the pro-plagiarism Web sites have ready-made papers available for immediate downloading, but those obviously run a greater risk of being detected. Custom-written papers, designed to meet a specific length, number of citations, format, etc., only take a few days or less for delivery. One Web site even allows you to interview different writers and choose whom you would like to write your paper. Or you may choose to have numerous writers work on your paper in order to get it done more quickly. Most sites tout that their employees are professional writers or college professors. College professors? The very ones who should be most concerned about plagiarism!

Papers can be purchased for a per-page fee; some are touted as being free, if you ignore the hefty shipping and handling fee, of course. Most prices range from \$9.99 a page to \$25 a page. One Web site (<http://www.mostpopular-term-papers.com>) offered custom papers written and delivered by sunrise the following day. The cost was a mere three times the usual rate of \$19.95 per page, but did not specify in which time zone the sunrise would occur. So a five-page paper could set a student back a whopping \$300. Delivery is often not included in the price, either. Delivery can be done by email, fax, or standard mail. Fax and email are the least expensive options for delivery, adding an additional \$2 to \$4 a page extra. You may also opt to have your paper delivered to you in hardcopy by FedEx for an additional \$20 to \$40 flat rate. So, even a paper advertised as free could cost a very large amount once everything is tallied in. After all, not all cheaters are Wal-Mart heirs. These huge fees for papers would

make the service cost prohibitive for many, leaving only wealthier students as a market.

Cheating Doesn't Pay

Not only is buying online custom papers unethical, but students often find themselves getting very badly written papers. (So what did you expect? Ecommerce integrity?) One Web site we looked at promised quality "research" papers about "Shakespeare's Twelfth night" (*sic*) [<http://www.directessays.com>]. A student purchasing a badly written paper suffers all the usual consequences of plagiarism, but also the added consequence of a low grade. We would assume that a student paying \$200 or more for a paper would hardly appreciate a failing or low grade. And there are no money-back guarantees.

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All the Web pages we looked at guarantee original, custom-written papers that are not plagiarized themselves. They really go out of their way to reassure buyers that their newly written papers will not include any plagiarized material. Most popular-term-papers.com claims to "use a variety of plagiarism detection resources to ensure your term paper is plagiarism free and won't end up in a mass term paper database."

Many online plagiarism detection services now offer services similar to Turnitin, either free or for a fee. And not all of them are solely for the use of professors to check their students' papers. Some of these sites offer their services to the paper mill Web sites to verify that the papers being sold have not been plagiarized. One of these resources, Plagiarism Guru [<http://www.plagiarismguru.com>], announces that it is known "Worldwide as the standard in online plagiarism prevention." Another online paper mill [<http://www.researchpaperquest.com>] contracts with this service, guaranteeing in a logo from Plagiarism Guru that it is "plagiarism safe." Yes, a logo just like the ones you can download when you run a Web page through W3C or Bobby to verify ADA compliance. In effect, the papers are not plagiarized until the student actually turns them in and claims them as his own original work.

So What Can We Do?

Teachers and librarians usually incorporate some kind of instruction or warnings about plagiarism into the class curriculum. We explain to students what con-

stitutes plagiarism. We give them guidelines on writing citations and how to give credit where credit is due. Our institutions subscribe to Turnitin.com or other companies that can help identify previously used materials. But, as noted earlier, these custom papers could pass through plagiarism detectors with flying colors, since, technically, these papers are original works not turned in or published before. We imagine that some students might actually consider these purchased papers acceptable for those same reasons. After all, the papers were not prewritten and used before. The students didn't take them verbatim from a Web site or a journal article.

Universities really need to make it crystal clear to students that turning in any work that they did not create is plagiarism. The standard warning in a class

syllabus may not be detailed enough to fully educate the students in exactly what constitutes plagiarism. Many universities have academic honor codes, but students probably get those codes along with a large package of information about the university when they are accepted or enrolled. It does not seem to make an impact on them until they are caught and threatened with expulsion. Some simply do not seem to care, as evidenced by the sharply increasing numbers who openly admit to cheating.

Detecting some plagiarism is relatively simple for many faculty. Many times faculty get suspicious if a student cannot speak well or communicate clearly in class, but yet suddenly seems able to write a perfect paragraph or page in a paper, one inconsistent with their perceived writing style or abilities. In some cases, students copy from works in the field with which the professor is very well acquainted or more shockingly even may have written themselves! (An instance of this appeared in an article by George Hesselberg, "Coming to terms with Internet cheating," *Wisconsin State Journal*, Sept. 30, 2001, p. G1.) Perhaps if the cheaters paid more attention in class and studying, they wouldn't make such obvious mistakes, but then they probably wouldn't be cheaters.

More and more, faculty are asking that students show their progress throughout the research process by requiring students to submit outlines, research notes, and drafts. These can demonstrate that the papers are indeed the students' own original work. Continued collaboration and work between academic faculty and their librarians can also help reduce the problem. ♦