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Unintentional Plagiarism: Who Should Bear the Burden?

Many of the plagiarism policies that colleges and universities instruct their faculty to give to students during the first week of classes are often written in a negative context. The overall language and tone is explicitly condemning and a majority of it is comprised of countless punishments and reprimands that can be placed upon students if they choose to disobey any aspect of the academic integrity policy. Seldom are students given clear guidance so they can understand what constitutes plagiarism and what steps can be taken to avoid infractions. A majority of these policies lack the type of verbiage that reassures students that their institution intends to assist them learn about and understand this topic. Plagiarism policies written in a vague manner have ultimately led many institutions to adopt a pragmatic approach when dealing with unintentional plagiarism, which can be a very dangerous and ineffective approach.

Many academic integrity policies are grounded in a moralistic framework. For instance, the University of Missouri-Columbia has a clause in their policy that states: “The term **plagiarism** includes, but is not limited to: (i) use by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without fully and properly crediting the author with footnotes, citations, or bibliographical reference. Faculty members have a special obligation to expect high standards of academic honesty in all student work. Students have a special obligation to adhere to such standards” (University of Missouri Standard of Conduct). From this statement, it is clear that if a student were to hand in an essay and did not properly acknowledge an author or properly cite the text, he or she would be in violation of the plagiarism policy. However, in the article “Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty,” Rebecca Moore Howard posits:

Universities’ policies describe plagiarism in moral terms when they classify it as a form of “academic dishonesty.” At the same time, though, these policies often define plagiarism in formalist terms, as features of texts. Plagiarism policies may even specifically exclude the writer’s intentions, stipulating that plagiarism is plagiarism even if the writer is ignorant of its prohibition. (1995, p. 797)

Thus, how can plagiarism policies such as the one used at the University of Missouri-Columbia be effective

when the guidelines themselves are unable to take into consideration a student’s intentions? Perhaps the student genuinely did not know how to appropriately paraphrase or correctly cite the source. Additionally, I argue that institutions’ adoption of the concept of morality is not an essential element that is inherently interconnected with the notion of plagiarism (Howard, 1995, p. 797). In short, the problem is that these academic policies are primarily focused on treating unintentional plagiarism as an ethical dilemma for students, rather than using it as a valuable learning opportunity to assist students learn the skills necessary to avoid plagiarizing in the future.

An explanation as to why these integrity policies are vague and sparse in providing details is most likely due to institutions’ overall philosophy and mindset. That is, there may be a general lack of communication between how institutions define plagiarism, students’ understanding or perception of what plagiarism means, and more importantly, the unreal expectations institutions have of students to already be familiar with or knowledgeable about preventing plagiarism. In 2007, a freshman at Southern Illinois University was quoted by the school’s paper concerning an email he had received from the university regarding the subject of plagiarism: “They just said, don’t do it. They’re like, you already know the typical rules” (qtd. in McGahan). While it is clear that this is a flawed approach in handling this complicated issue, how can institutions make such a judgment call and automatically assume that all students are already aware of plagiarism rules and procedures?

I would like to explore some of the viable remedies available that help keep institutions’ integrity policies from being written in such a perplexing manner. To do so, I believe it would be beneficial to return to Howard’s article where she states:

The regulatory fiction of the autonomous author continues to prevail in academic prohibitions of plagiarism. Institutions’ uniformly juridical policies against plagiarism restrict the extent to which pedagogy can respond to revised representations of authorship. (1995, p. 797)

I believe the main reasons that teachers and students have difficulty dealing with unintentional plagiarism is based on the following: Poorly written or missing policies, a failure to provide definitions of key terms, an absence of accurate examples, and a lack of clear instructions about how to manage unintentional plagiarism. Therefore, I call for an immediate change in academic integrity procedures. More specifically, I

call for a revision in overall tone, clarity, and for more specificity in the kinds of information included in plagiarism policies.

As it stands now, the tone and clarity of many academic policies are based on language that is scornful and critical of students from the onset, while usually written in a vague manner at best. Rather than using such vernacular, it may be useful to revise these policies so they are written in an exploratory manner. That is, instead of being overtly explicit, the information in these policies could be presented in a way that acts as a guide and reference that students can return to when they are unsure of whether they are properly following a particular rule. However, this would only be plausible if these policies fully explained the proper ways to avoid unintentional plagiarism, such as summarizing, patch-writing, and paraphrasing. Many institutions that have trouble dealing with this issue could adopt some of the specific language and approach that the Council of Writing Program Administrators set forth in "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices":

Students are not guilty of plagiarism when they try in good faith to acknowledge others' work, but fail to do so accurately or fully. These failures are largely the result of failures in prior teaching and learning: students lack the knowledge of and ability to use the conventions of authorial attribution. (2)

This phrasing, along with other positive and encouraging language, is listed on page two of the document, which instantly projects a supportive and understanding mentality when describing this complex subject. If institutions were to implement such wording into their plagiarism policies, not only would students be more cognizant of these concepts and approaches, they may also be in a better position to grasp the numerous rules and procedures that encapsulate this topic.

Additionally, if these academic policies were more detailed, then teachers and students would have a clearer definition of what is expected of them when encountering possible instances of unintentional plagiarism. Therefore, "if teachers are to adopt a positive approach, they must be able to do so within the [boundaries] of their universities' regulations on plagiarism. [These] regulations, however, typically describe plagiarism in all its forms as a problem for adjudication, and this generalization leaves teachers little space for pedagogical alternatives" (Howard 789). Thus, many current policies indirectly affect how teachers can handle unintentional plagiarism. In the latter half of her article, Howard lays out a prototype integrity policy she believes would greatly benefit both parties:

Patch-writing, for example, though unacceptable for final-draft academic writing, is a technique that learners typically employ in their early encounters with unfamiliar discourse. Because patch-writing

represents a blend of the learner's words and phrases with those of the source, it is a valuable strategy for helping the learner appropriate and learn to understand unfamiliar words and ideas. Most patch-writers, far from being immoral members of the academic community, are instead people working their way through cognitive difficulties. The instructor can help in this process by making clear that patch-writing will not suffice for finished academic prose. Even more importantly, the instructor can aid the student in understanding the materials that are presenting such challenges. Once the student feels comfortable with those materials, he or she will probably be able to write about them with greater ease. (801)

Moreover, the policy goes on to state particular categories such as "additional advice for students," and "additional advice for faculty" (800-02). In the student advice section, Howard provides step-by-step instruction about how to be vigilant when paraphrasing, using quotation marks, patch-writing, and summarizing, to name a few, while giving a clear definition and providing concrete examples of each. This policy stands as an example of the type of language and format academic institutions need to include within their own rules and procedures regarding plagiarism.

The issue of unintentional plagiarism is important because disconnects are often revealed between the institution, teachers, and students. The institution's explanation of plagiarism is often brief and not fully explained to incoming freshman who may be unfamiliar with the term or its implications. Many students are legitimately trying to do their best to avoid plagiarism, yet, are penalized and even dismissed from their respective institutions because no one helped them learn the proper ways to cite and summarize a body of text, or even discuss and introduce the basic concepts and meaning of plagiarism. While the institution, teachers, and students are all responsible for the ongoing dilemmas and confusion of unintentional plagiarism, one party may be more to blame than others. There is a correlation between the institution's overall academic policies and how that statement is either directly or indirectly affecting faculty's and students' understanding of unintentional plagiarism. Therefore, because many of these integrity policies do not include a clear definition and enough specifics regarding how to avoid unintentional plagiarism, I believe that the burden is more on the academic institutions to change their overall philosophy and approach to help lessen the gap that exists between these parties.

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