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Developing Students' Awareness of  
Plagiarism: Crisis and Opportunities

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# Developing Students' Awareness of Plagiarism: Crisis and Opportunities

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## Background Information

In the past several years, the faculty and administration at the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University have looked to the C. W. Post Campus B. Davis Schwartz Memorial Library for assistance and leadership in grappling with issues related to student plagiarism. Having done extensive work on plagiarism, I was selected by the Dean of Libraries to function as the Coordinator of Plagiarism Activities, charged with providing campus-wide support to faculty and students on these issues.

Previously, I collaborated with the director of the Faculty Technology Resource Center (an office established by the campus Information Technology Department to assist faculty with integrating technology into the classroom) to offer a plagiarism workshop for faculty at Long Island University's C. W. Post Campus and satellite campuses in Brooklyn and Southampton, New York.

Recognizing the Internet as the principal venue, one that is fast, easy, and satisfying in successfully accessing information on almost any imaginable topic, I offer customized seminars to faculty each semester on the prevention and detection of plagiarism to give them a further advantage when reading and reviewing student papers and projects. Similar classes, entitled Plagiarism Awareness Workshops, are presented to students in a variety of ways: by special arrangement in the classrooms, during freshman orientation, and by incorporating plagiarism issues into the Library Instruction program.

The authoring software PowerPoint, which is introductory, informational, and representational, is presented in the students' Plagiarism Awareness session. Clear examples of reputed plagiarism are included, as well

as tips on how to avoid it. In addition, Campus academic misconduct policies and repercussions are highlighted.

Text from C. W. Post's Campus Ethos Statement is used in this session to conduct an online, interactive lesson that depicts scenarios on how students might plagiarize unintentionally. Examples include different versions of paraphrases, quotes, and citations that students are asked to compare, and then determine and substantiate whether or not specific phrases have been plagiarized or used correctly.

These innovative exercises always seem to capture the attention of students more than the preceding PowerPoint lecture. Described as Millennial students (formerly Generation X and Y) by Holliday and Li (2004), students today "tend to be visual learners and multitaskers and get bored quickly" (p. 357) and have never experienced learning without using technology as a tool. This new lesson seems to challenge them, stimulates class discussion, and gives rise to thought-provoking questions on writing research papers. The sessions then end on a high note, with a positive spin on an otherwise dry topic of little interest to this group of digital learners.

### Purpose of the Study

Relevant articles, books, and media, as well as workshops and conferences, have revealed that the rise of plagiarism can be attributed to many factors, not the least of which is the Internet. How much plagiarism is unintentional and what can be done about it is a large part of this conversation. This study examines students' understanding of plagiarism as it relates to their ability to write research papers.

### Literature Review

In June 2005, based on data collected from a survey that involved about 50,000 undergraduates from more than 60 colleges, McCabe (2006) of the Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) related that "levels of cheating and plagiarism remain high." In April of 2006, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that 37 graduate students studying mechanical engineering at Ohio University (ranked in the top 50 public national universities in the United States by *U. S. News & World Report*) plagiarized their theses and dissertations. Another plagiarism scandal involved Kaavya Viswanathan, a Harvard University sophomore. The two novels that she wrote for the publisher Little, Brown and Company contained passages that seemed strikingly similar to the writings of another author, Meagan F. McCafferty. Words and plot ideas from McCafferty's two books, *Sloppy Firsts* and *Second Helpings*, appeared in *Opal Mehta*, Viswanathan's first published book.

Other research studies (Overbey and Guiling, 1999) show that students' inexperience in research writing has contributed to the plagiarism count. In many cases, students are academically unprepared to face the challenges of higher education. Wilhoit wrote that, "few students enter college fully understanding the relationship between plagiarism and the rules about quoting, paraphrasing, and documenting material" (p. 162). Professor D. R. Dant of Brigham Young University conducted a study in 1986 on 20% of her freshmen composition classes. She determined that high school English classes had failed to provide students with the information needed to write without resorting to plagiarizing. Dant's studies reinforce the idea that students are challenged in understanding the intricacies of writing correctly without plagiarizing. In another research study (Roig, 1997), an investigation of undergraduate writing also led to the conclusion that students need a great deal of assistance in understanding how to paraphrase correctly. Roig's study contained ten versions of the same paragraph, two of which contained clear instances of the simplest and most common types of plagiarism. Participants were asked to distinguish plagiarized texts from those that were not. The results showed that half of the students surveyed were unable to differentiate between the two paragraphs.

Wilhoit (1994) suggests that understanding the rules for correct documentation is difficult for students. Overbey and Guiling (1999) have indicated that instructional benefits for students are the greatest when there are more in-depth classroom lessons on how to write and research correctly, suggesting that on an ongoing basis, faculty in all disciplines provide students with adequate instruction that includes tutorials on how to use information properly in their writing.

According to Ashworth and Bannister (1997), students have difficulty integrating new information into their own work or writing. In this study more than one respondent out of nineteen (a relatively small sample of graduate students) agonized over whether they had cited sources correctly. Wilhoit (1994) stated, "We cannot assume that our students have these skills or that the information will be covered in composition classes" (p.164). For faculty to assume that students are capable of writing assignments honestly and correctly or, better still, that they possess the basic essentials to write, is misleading and can lead to plagiarism.

In my dual role as Reference Librarian and Coordinator of Plagiarism Initiatives, I found that there is a common misunderstanding about plagiarism in academic discourse. I have also seen that there is a familiar thread that wrongly propagates this misunderstanding. Plagiarism is using another's ideas, words, or knowledge in any format (print, electronic, media) and passing them as one's own work. Accidental plagiarism can occur when students paraphrase, summarize, or quote incorrectly. For example, in the Spring 2006 semester, 12 of the 16 papers I checked appeared to contain unintentional plagiarism. One such paper was a master thesis, seven were graduate research paper

assignments, and four were undergraduate essays. Most of the inadvertent plagiarism shared a common feature: When plagiarism was present, lines and paragraphs were taken verbatim from sources such as print books, websites, and full-text articles; none were from commercial paper mills. The sources of the plagiarized texts were clearly cited in the bibliography.

One of my colleagues shared a similar experience she had with one of her students, who is intelligent and highly motivated. In this case, after proofreading an honors thesis research project (at the request of the student who wrote the paper), she discovered that a substantial amount of the thesis was taken directly from print and online sources. In recalling the incident, the professor remarked that this particular student simply did not realize that she had plagiarized. Should these unintentional cases be included in the count for the startling rise in plagiarism?

In short, instances like these demonstrate limitations in students' ability and knowledge to use research in their writing, as supported by Overbey and Guiling (1999). Students have difficulties in synthesizing information and integrating new and prior knowledge. Moreover, if the task of using print sources (a format they presumably have used since kindergarten) is a formidable challenge, imagine their difficulty in using sources in today's online environment/culture.

Coiro's study (2005) illustrates some of the innovative, informational sources that students born in a technological society—Millennial (Generation X and Y) or "NetGen" students encounter and use daily. The Internet introduces new complexities to the synthesis process. Shifting through information on websites, video clips, collaborative discussion boards, and blogs compounds the challenges for readers who already struggle with synthesizing multiple sources of paper-based information. Yet digital technology has made it particularly easy for students to incorporate portions of other people's writing into their own work (p. 34).

As teachers and librarians, we can easily convince ourselves that students are expert users of information because of the way they embrace and use technology. On the Internet, students can find information on any topic from a variety of sources, within seconds, and with little assistance. But when we see text such as "web pages contain text conventions that are unfamiliar even to many tech-savvy students" (Coiro, 2005, p. 31), we are reminded to recognize students' need of instruction on using and synthesizing information, whether it is from books, periodicals, or the Internet.

Responses in one-on-one sessions and in classroom discussions about the Internet have led me to conclude that many students believe that information on the Internet is free for the taking. Though students today can navigate the World Wide Web with greater facility than their professors, it appears that they

still need assistance. In the same vein, Donald L. McCabe, professor and founder of the CAI (affiliated with Duke University), who has conducted many research studies on dishonesty among students in academia, has concluded that, "students struggle to understand what constitutes acceptable use of the Internet." The perception that information found on the web is freely accessible and therefore can be legally and morally used without attribution also contributes to this problem.

## Methodology

A survey in the form of a pre-test and post-test was designed and administered to incoming freshmen at the C. W. Post Campus. The pre-test was designed to ascertain incoming students' basic understanding of plagiarism. The post-test was intended to indicate the usefulness of the Plagiarism Awareness session.

The survey instruments were composed of 12 (6 pre-test and 6 post-test) multiple-choice questions. Both tests used the same questions, in the same order, with the same choices. Because the entire Plagiarism Awareness session and survey took 40 minutes, the questions were designed to take as little time as possible from the teaching part of the session. Respondents' anonymity was guaranteed to secure the most accurate and honest responses, and the questions were very simple and straightforward to encourage responses (see Appendix).

## Participants

Participants were freshmen in College 101 classes (our freshman orientation program) and were referred to as the millennial generation. The sample is a fair representation of the student makeup at C. W. Post Campus, with most of them primarily from the New York metropolitan area, as well as other parts of the country. For this study, international students were not included.

In the beginning of the Fall semester of 2005, as Plagiarism Coordinator, I sent out a blanket e-mail correspondence to instructors of 50 College 101 classes and invited them to schedule their class for a session geared specifically toward increasing plagiarism awareness. Twenty-two classes participated in this initiative and 17 were surveyed, including 1 Composition Honors, and 16 Composition/Reading, Writing, and Interpretation classes. A total of 326 freshmen were surveyed (from a total population of approximately 900 freshmen).

## Honors Program

The Honors Program provides for students in any major who are “academically gifted,” with a specially designed curriculum fostering “enrichment and critical thinking,” and aims to nurture each student’s exceptional abilities to help him/her grow individually and academically.

### **Reading, Writing, and Interpretation**

The Reading, Writing, and Interpretation Program is an intense remediation program designed by the English Department for freshmen “to develop reading comprehension, improve academic writing, conduct library research, and utilize information technology” (McNabb, 2001, p. vii). Instructors teaching in this program collaborate with library faculty to include multiple sessions of a library component to the class with an emphasis on information literacy and the research process. This is another opportunity for students to learn skills not acquired in high school or to reinforce what they did learn at that level.

### **English 1 Composition**

English 1 Composition is a core class for all incoming freshmen (except students who have been recognized as having already fulfilled the requirement). This required class is designed to further build on and improve the skills of students to write, read, interpret, and analyze information.

### **Procedure**

Both the survey and the Plagiarism Awareness session were held in the Library Instruction Room. Before each survey was administered, respondents were instructed to omit their name, class number, and teacher’s name from the survey to ensure anonymity. The second part of the survey, the post-test, was given immediately following the Plagiarism Awareness session.

### **Data Analysis**

Table 1 provides a chart of the millennial freshmen who were surveyed and the type of class designation. The participants represented about one-third of the total population studied. Forty-four percent of the participants came from the Reading, Writing, and Interpretation classes. Thirty-eight percent of the students that checked “Unsure” were uncertain about the appropriate class designation (whether they belonged in English 1 Composition or in Reading, Writing, and Interpretation). In addition, there was 1 Honors class (23 students) among the 18% in the English 1 Composition classes.

**Table 1**

**Which of the following English classes do you attend?**

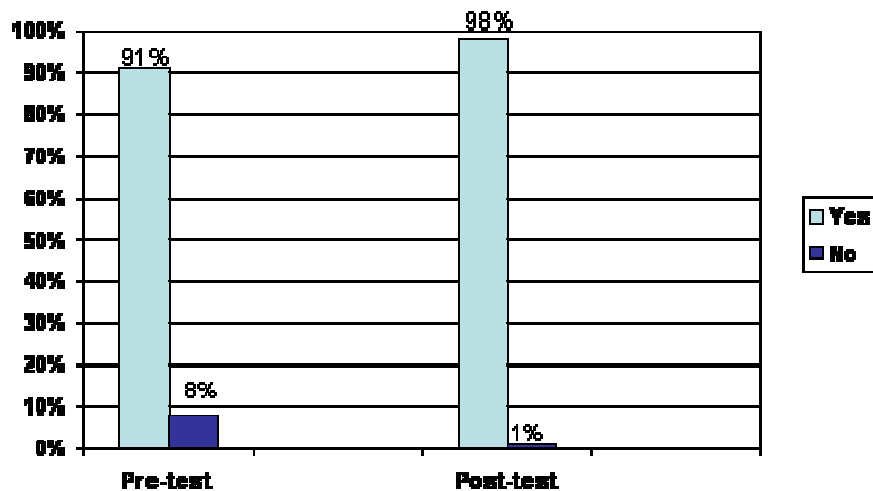
Classification	Number in Sample	Percentage of Total
Reading, Writing, and Interpretation	143	44
Unsure	124	38
English 1 Composition	59	18
TOTALS	326	100

Study participants were asked if they understood the meaning of plagiarism and were instructed to select "Yes" or "No."

Figure 1 indicates slight differences when the pre-test is compared to the post-test. The pre-test indicates that 91% of the respondents reported that they understood the meaning of plagiarism, 8% claimed the opposite, and 1% (3 students) failed to answer. After the Plagiarism Awareness session, the post-test revealed a 6% increase in students who believed that they gained greater awareness of the meaning of plagiarism, that is, 97% of the students were more knowledgeable about plagiarism, 1% still did not quite understand, and 2% did not answer the question.

Figure 1

Do you understand the meaning of plagiarism?



The question in Figure 2 attempts to gain insight into students' knowledge of plagiarism after graduating from high school and entering college. It appears from these data that almost half (51%) of the students surveyed did not receive substantial information pertaining to plagiarism in high school, whereas the other half (49%) received some instruction. After the Plagiarism Awareness session, the post-test revealed that there was an increase

of 36%, that is, 87% of students felt that they were better informed about plagiarism, and 13% of students felt that they lacked any knowledge about the topic.

Figure 2

Were you made aware of plagiarism in high school?

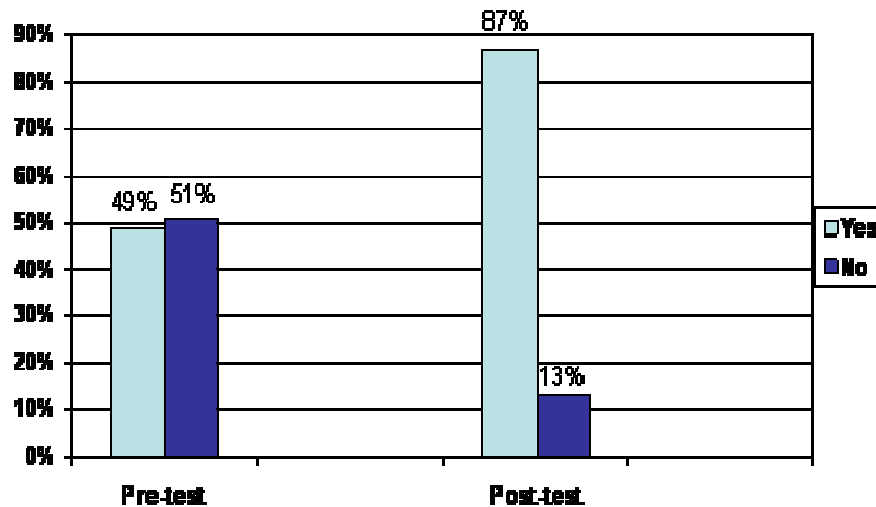
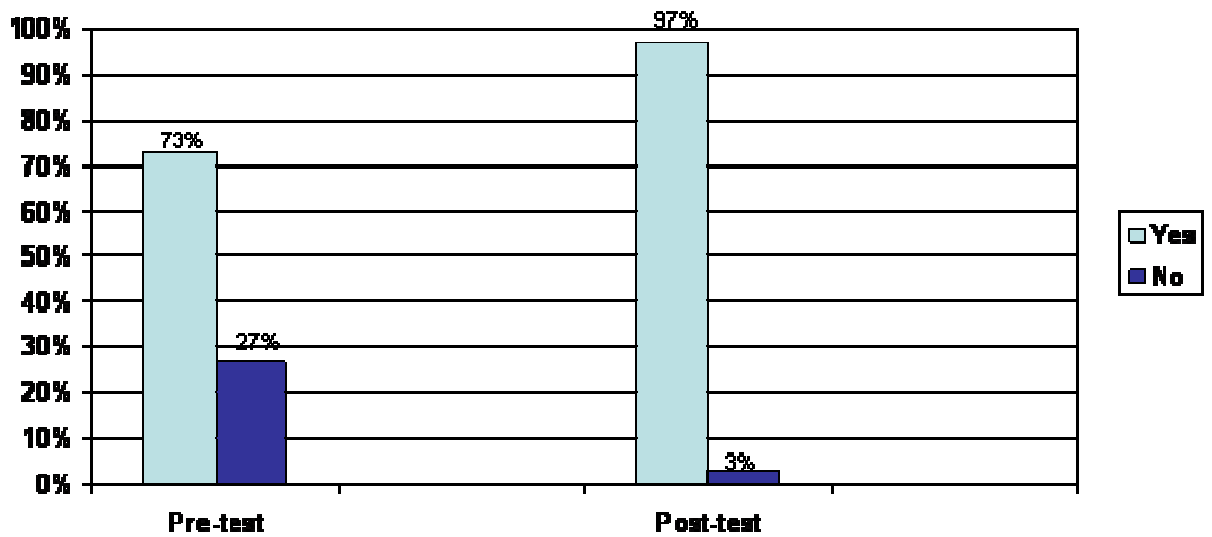


Figure 3 examines specifically the students' knowledge of using and incorporating information from books in their writing and research. Seventy-three percent of students (which comprises all 18% English 1 Composition, 29% Reading, Writing, and Interpretation, and 26% Unsure [Table 1]) stated on the pre-test that it is acceptable to copy from a book without crediting the author/source. It would appear that the 24% increase, bringing the total to 97% on the post-test, can be attributed to the information received in the Plagiarism Awareness session. Three percent of participants need more assistance.

Figure 3

Does copying from a book without crediting the source constitute plagiarism?

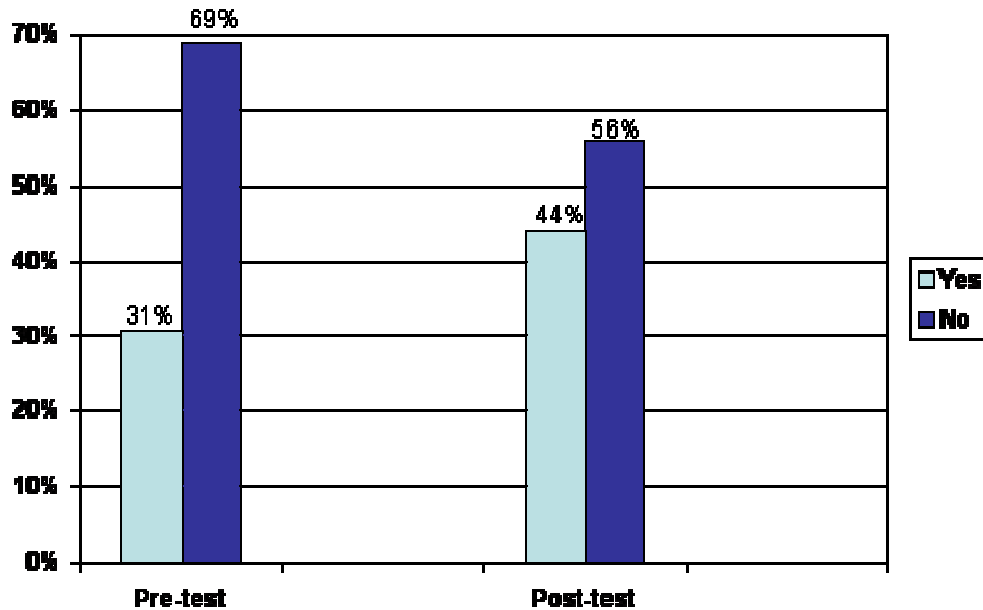


According to research and my personal experience, as well as that of my colleagues, students today use the Internet primarily to do research. Therefore, it was of interest to obtain information relating to their knowledge of the use of online sources. As a result, I polled students on their ability to cite online sources.

In Figure 4 the majority of students (69%) stated that they did not know how to cite Internet online sources; 31% stated that they did. On the post-test, 56% answered that they still did not know how to cite an online source and 44% claimed the opposite. A comparison between these two tests indicated that the Plagiarism Awareness sessions showed only a 13% difference in the students who answered "No."

Figure 4

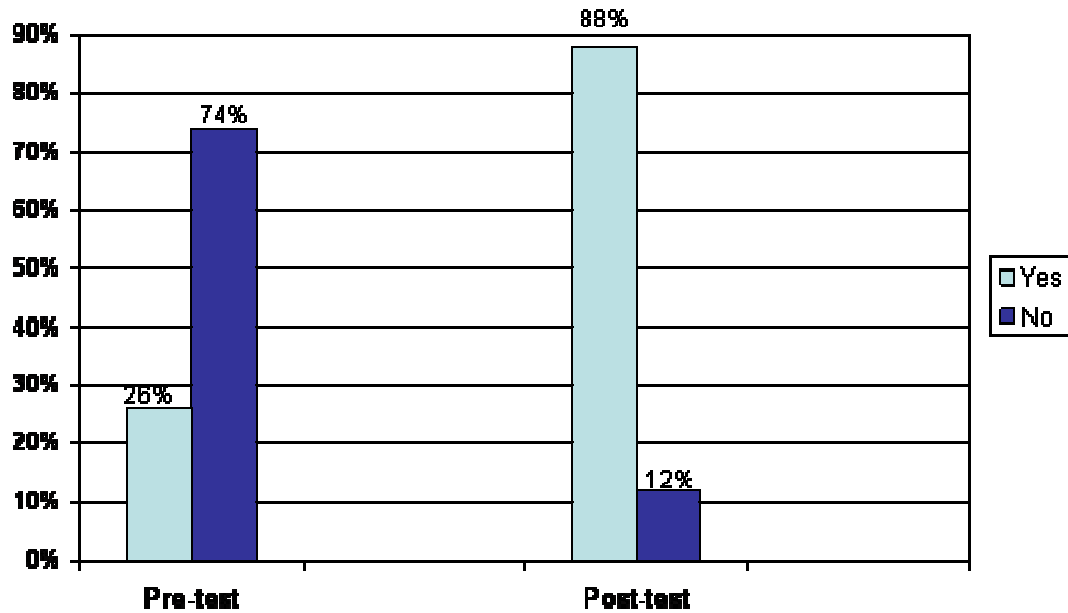
Do you know how to cite Internet sources?



The final question (Figure 5) is aimed at informing participants of the plagiarism problems facing college students and determining if they are aware of plagiarism issues at this level of education. On the pre-test, 74% responded that they were uninformed of the seriousness of plagiarism, with the remaining 26% answering that they were aware of the problem. Data on the post-test indicate an overwhelmingly noticeable change. When comparing the responses of the 74% who responded “No” on the pre-test to that of the post-test (12%), there is a 62% increase of students who felt better informed about the seriousness of plagiarism. These responses seem to indicate that the Plagiarism Awareness sessions gave students a better understanding of plagiarism, with the hope that these students would be less likely to plagiarize as a result of this exposure.

Figure 5

Are you aware of the seriousness of plagiarism?



## Conclusion

I have learned a great deal about students' understanding of plagiarism both in high school and the first year of college. This study provides a comprehensive synopsis of my discoveries, along with some recommendations. However, despite all of our efforts, as well as the technological advancements made to prevent plagiarism, I must agree with Gallant and Drinan (2006) that plagiarism will always be here.

Most students want to complete their research assignments honestly but find it difficult, simply because they are clueless on how to accomplish it. Doing research is an involved and detailed process that requires the ability to find, analyze, and synthesize information while applying the appropriate rules of grammar and citation. The concept of interpreting and implementing the rules of plagiarism—to take information from varied sources and knead it into one's own research writing—proves to be challenging and confusing for students.

## High School

This study shows that recent high school graduates—freshmen entering college—are unaware and unprepared for higher education. Many students (those that lack paraphrasing and analyzing abilities) have difficulty in carrying out straightforward tasks such as citing book sources. It is alarming that 73% of the participants in this study (post-test) failed to correctly answer the question, "Does copying from a book without crediting the source constitute plagiarism?"

## What to Do in High School?

This research indicates that early intervention might help to alleviate plagiarism. The recognition of the importance in and emphasis on writing research papers should begin during the high school years. Adding a more intense reading, writing, and research curriculum at this level might help to produce high school graduates who are more fully prepared for college.

Some higher educational institutions have requirements that students must satisfy before they are able to file for graduation. For example, here at C. W. Post Campus, undergraduates must secure passing grades in library, reading, and computer competency examinations before they can file for graduation. If students fail, they must attend workshops in the areas that they were unable to satisfy. Subjecting high school students to a similar graduation requisite, for example, requiring Reading, Comprehension, and Writing competencies before diplomas are granted, can assist in building proficiencies in areas that are critical for students to successfully continue their academic studies in higher education.

## What to Do in College?

Colleges offer a wide variety of remedial programs for students with deficiencies in reading, comprehension, and writing. Students should be offered the skills necessary to navigate not only the social environment of college but also the academic and research culture. A useful way would be to take a proactive approach like that of Wilhoit (1994), who advised, "We might more successfully combat the problem by spending more time in class helping students learn how to avoid it" (p. 1), as well as that of Lampert (2004), who indicated that students need to learn how integrate information.

Another suggestion might be to implement an intense one- or two-credit core course (over one semester) that integrates information literacy, research techniques, citation formatting instruction, and extensive plagiarism discussions for freshmen. This might give students the foundation from which to work and help them feel more confident in their academic aspirations.

McCabe (2005) aptly borrows from the perspective of the popular African proverb: "It takes the whole campus community—students, faculty and administration—to effectively educate a student" (p. 29). In the same vein, collaboration among educators is essential in assisting students to become competent users of information.

Having the academic librarian work with the faculty to offer tips and techniques in designing writing exercises using current informational sources can contribute to the reduction of plagiarism. Offering introductory lessons is

insufficient; instead, a more concentrated research writing lesson on a one-on-one basis or in a small class (1-8 students) might prove satisfactory.

Requiring many short content-based writing assignments to increase writing proficiency can double a student's rewards: With a single application, a student's knowledge of the class subject and abilities to research and write are enhanced. Homework assignments can be used as assessment tools to demonstrate and reinforce a student's ability to use and cite informational sources discussed in class. Many of these suggestions are applicable to a wide range of students, from those at the undergraduate level to the more advanced graduate and doctoral students.

### Millennial Students or Generation X and Y

Capturing the attention of the millennial generation probably means that teaching methodologies and lessons need repackaging—less lecturing, more engaging, more fun, and most of all, technologically interactive. The answer might be found in Jon Stewart's Comedy Central "fake" news program, *The Daily Show*. Indiana University recently published a scholarly study that examined the coverage of traditional broadcast network newscasts and compared it to Jon Stewart's show. Results indicated that the age group that chooses this format (many of which fall into the Millennial and Generation X and Y categories) found that they do receive a "substantive" amount of "real" news.

Reinforcement of the rules of writing is important at all levels, whether in high school or beyond. Warnings, verbally and on the class syllabus, are not enough to help students achieve success and accomplish their research assignments properly. For educators to expect students to write honestly and correctly, we must each do our part. Gerhardt (2006, May 26) states:

In college basketball, the rules are not taught once during a brief orientation and then forgotten. They are repeatedly discussed as the season progresses. As we push writers into the creative arena, the rules of the writing game should get the same attention.

Educators (teachers and librarians) might use instances of plagiarism as an opportunity to assist in student development (Overbey and Guiling, 1999) instead of directing their energies into being detectives (Wilhoit, 1994). According to McCabe (2005), "If we truly believe in our role as educators, we would do better to view most instances of cheating as educational opportunities" (p. 26). Plagiarism offers us another chance to help students master the mechanics of research and writing.

Abigail Adams, a self-educated writer and the wife of John Adams, second President of the United States, said, "learning is not attained by

chance. It must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence." Butterfield (1973, p. 313), the presenter at the C. W. Post Honors Conference, "What is Right? Honors Conference Debates Ethics of Today," remarked that Michael Jordan did not become a great basketball player overnight; it was his dedication, skill, and the very important innumerable hours of practice that made him succeed. Likewise, the same principle can be used for research writing. It is a process; and with practice, it gets better. Therefore, by using these approaches and propositions in higher education to increase students' knowledge by building strong research and writing skills, perhaps we can begin to tackle this problem and eventually raise awareness to the point that the number of instances of plagiarism is greatly reduced.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire for Pre-Test and Post-Test

C.W. Post Campus/ B. Davis Schwartz Memorial Library

College 101 Plagiarism Survey

Please Circle One

Pre-Test and Post Test

1. Which one of the following English classes do you attend?

(a) Composition I (b) Reading and Interpretation (c) Unsure

2. Do you understand the meaning of plagiarism?

(a) Yes (b) No

3. Were you made aware of plagiarism in high school?

(a) Yes (b) No

4. Does copying from a book without crediting the source constitute plagiarism?

(a) Yes (b) No

5. Do you know how to cite Internet sources?

(a) Yes (b) No

6. Are you aware of the seriousness of plagiarism?

(a) Yes (b) No

Created by Amrita Madray

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Thank you!