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Deterring Plagiarism: A New Role for Librarians

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Introduction

The proliferation of student plagiarism on university campuses is paralleled by the increasing number of articles appearing in academic journals presenting varying opinions on the topic. Opinions run the gamut from outrage at the student offenders to pointing fingers at faculty members who fail to create plagiarism-proof assignments. One also reads about controversial new methods for deterring and detecting plagiarism, most notably, online plagiarism detection systems. In surveying the literature, one can construct valid arguments for each point of view. This paper will explore the plagiarism dilemma from a librarian's vantage point, and will outline the strong support that has been offered to teaching faculty with plagiarism problems by the Joan and Donald E. Axinn Library of Hofstra University. It will also examine how Hofstra University decided to subscribe to Turnitin.com (www.turnitin.com), a popular but controversial online plagiarism detection system.

As librarians, we know that detection is not the main objective in a campaign against plagiarism. Rather, universities should concentrate on educating students as to what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. Consequently, as our last point we will summarize how Hofstra librarians are reaching out to both faculty and students in order to inform them about this fundamental concern. This paper will not necessarily offer the definitive philosophical answer to solving the plagiarism dilemma, but will attempt to convey a "reality" account of how we have dealt with student plagiarism at Hofstra University.

Overview of the Plagiarism Problem

Hofstra University is a mid-sized liberal arts university on Long Island with approximately 10,000 full- and part-time undergraduate students and about 3,700 graduate students. In addition, the Hofstra University School of Law has an enrollment of 1,700. In recent years, Hofstra, like other universities, has watched as students became adept at cutting and pasting from the Web, or purchasing papers from paper mills. Part of the dilemma is that many students are unfamiliar with what determines plagiarism and they stumble into it unawares, not only because they have never learned how to use sources, but sometimes because they have been taught that research *means* plagiarism

"Deterring Plagiarism: a New Role for Librarians," Margaret Burke. *Library Philosophy and Practice* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 2004)

1

(White 205). This sense of vagueness is exacerbated by the fact that, with the advent of the Internet, students have unlimited access to information. Additionally, the need for high GPAs to gain entrance to prestigious graduate schools creates an atmosphere of "anything goes" when it comes to completing research assignments.

Even a school such as the University of Virginia, long noted for its honor system, has fallen victim to cheating scandals. When confronted with the possibility that some of his students might have plagiarized, Professor Louis Bloomfield of UVA devised a computer program that detected students who had used "recycled" papers from his previous classes. He discovered that 158 of the 500 students in his Physics 105-106 class had cheated (Cullen 2002). This discouraging incident highlights the extent of the plagiarism problem and it also underscores the fact that students' thirst for knowledge has been replaced by a quest for good grades. The problem is so huge that the popular media is now focusing attention to it. The CBS television news program 60 Minutes devoted a segment to cheaters and Professor Donald L. McCabe, founder of the Center for Academic Integrity (www.academicintegrity.org/), told Morley Safer that pressure has turned competitive schools like UVA into academic rat races. In addition to academic pressure, there is the general slackening of ethical codes in society that seems to give the students the go-ahead to succeed at any cost. Students hear of noted historians who have plagiarized, corporate accountants who have cooked the books, and alleged plagiarized material from the Internet being presented recently at a critical United Nations session on Iraq; sadly, they see no harm in a little cheating on their part. This generation has grown up with cell phones, palm pilots, and downloaded music and they are more comfortable with cutting and pasting information from the Web than visiting the library in order to retrieve books or journal articles.

Role of the Library in Detecting Plagiarism

Considering the fact that the library is, at least theoretically, the central location for conducting research in the university, it makes sense that a librarian would be involved in dealing with unraveling the mysteries contained within some problematic student papers. Auer and Krupar (2001) state that librarians with liaison responsibilities or those who have good rapport with academic departments should begin a dialogue with faculty in order to provide information about websites and software. At the Axinn Library, we have reached out to the faculty by offering our help in detecting plagiarism. About five years ago, a reference librarian offered his services to faculty to help them solve some of their plagiarism problems. He held the formidable-sounding title of "plagiarism officer," which I inherited four years ago when he left the university. Over the past four years, my role as a reference librarian who helps to combat and detect plagiarism has changed. When I first took on the responsibility, faculty members would come to me with questionable papers and I would enter a few unusual phrases from the papers into a search engine, and, if I was lucky, I would find portions, or sometimes entire papers, that had been cut and pasted from the Web. This process would take anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. When I first began this task in April 1999, I received three to four requests a month. Requests for assistance from faculty began to

accelerate, however. In December of 2000, I received approximately 25 requests for help with suspicious papers.

Hofstra was not the only school facing this escalating problem. Professor. McCabe, who in addition to being the head of the Center for Academic Integrity , is also a professor of organization management at Rutgers University-Newark, where his area of expertise is ethical decision-making, centering particularly on student cheating. He recently completed a survey of 4,471 students at 25 high schools around the country. When asked if they ever submit papers downloaded in whole or in large part from the Internet, 15 percent answered, "Yes." (Roach 2001).

Early in the Spring 2001 semester, I began to read about Turnitin.com, a digital plagiarism detection system begun in 1999 by John Barrie, a biophysics graduate from the University of California. Turnitin.com offered a free two-month trial and the Axinn library signed up for the trial. We publicized the service via e-mail to faculty and offered demonstrations in the library to those who were interested. During the two-month period, twenty-nine faculty members took advantage of the trial.

To submit a paper to Turnitin the faculty member must have a digital copy of a student's paper, or they can ask individual students, or entire classes, to submit their own papers to the site. The latter method can prove to be an excellent deterrent to online plagiarism since students are aware that their papers are routinely being checked. At Hofstra we have asked that faculty members inform students that their papers may be submitted to Turnitin so that there will be no problems of students claiming that their rights have been infringed upon. The Turnitin software scans the Internet for any matching material and then returns an Originality Report. This report is a copy of the submitted paper that has been scanned for matching material from the Web, paper mills and Turnitin's own database. Any matches are underlined and color-coded to the original online source and returned within an hour.

In order to determine if the faculty was pleased with the Turnitin results, I developed and implemented a survey after the two-month trial was completed and received replies from about half of those who used the service. Following is a summary of the results of the survey and some of the responses that we received:

TURNITIN.COM TRIAL

SPRING 2001

RESPONSES: A total of 129 student papers were submitted to Turnitin.com, and *54* were tagged as possibly containing plagiarism. Thirteen faculty members responded to the survey; of those thirteen, seven filled out the survey form and six submitted general comments.

SELECTED SURVEY QUESTIONS:

QUESTION		YES	NO	MAYBE
1.	**Did you find the site user friendly?**	4	3	
2.	**Were you satisfied with the results?**	6		1
3.	**Student upload?**	1		
4.	**Faculty member upload?**	6		1
5.	**Would you use if we sign on?**	6		1
6.	**Should Univ. make service available?**	7		

INDIVIDUAL FACULTY MEMBER COMMENTS:

Professor, English:

"I used Turnitin for the first time last week and found it very easy and frighteningly effective. I think we should keep it for sure."

Professor, Biology:

"I think the University should continue its subscription to Turnitin. It seems to be better than anything else I'm aware of. I didn't catch any plagiarists using it, but colleagues have done so, and the more people who use it the better it will work. I'm planning to have classes upload their own papers in the future."

Associate Professor, New College:

"The site found material a student of mine had plagiarized. This was very helpful. It was also helpful when another student's paper was not found."

"Deterring Plagiarism: a New Role for Librarians," Margaret Burke. *Library Philosophy and Practice* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 2004)

4

"Please subscribe to this service!"

Assistant Professor, University Studies:

"I had a suspected case of plagiarism that I could not prove or track down. I submitted the paper and was provided with an analysis of the plagiarism and the sources to back up the charge."

"Given the extent of the problem and the sophisticated tools available to students for plagiarizing this service is essential."

Associate Professor, Political Science.

"I deeply appreciate the university's commitment to preventing plagiarism. I applaud the library for getting good instruction to us. The commitment to preventing plagiarism is a message our students NEED TO HEAR!!!"

Professor, English.

"I do think Turnitin might serve as something of a deterrent, but it's not foolproof. Some deterrence is better than none. I'd certainly recommend extending the subscription. We need as many weapons in our arsenal as we can get. The problem is getting worse."

Intellectual Property Rights

The comments above echo a common sense of desperation concerning the mushrooming problem of plagiarism. On the other hand, one faculty member from the English Dept. brought up the very prickly issue of intellectual property rights. He wrote:

> "I am somewhat concerned with the intellectual property rights of the individual students. Turnitin.com maintains a database of all the papers that are turned in to the site. Are we infringing on the students' intellectual rights by forcing them to donate papers to Turnitin's database?"

This question was certainly serious and it caused us to rethink our decision about signing on to the service. We immediately contacted Paul Wedlake of Turnitin and he assured us that student papers simply reside in their database and, since the database is not searchable, no one can access students' work. As he explained, Turnitin can act as a deterrent against collusion and can actually protect student papers from being plagiarized by other students since their work will show up as a match in the Turnitin database at the time of submission.
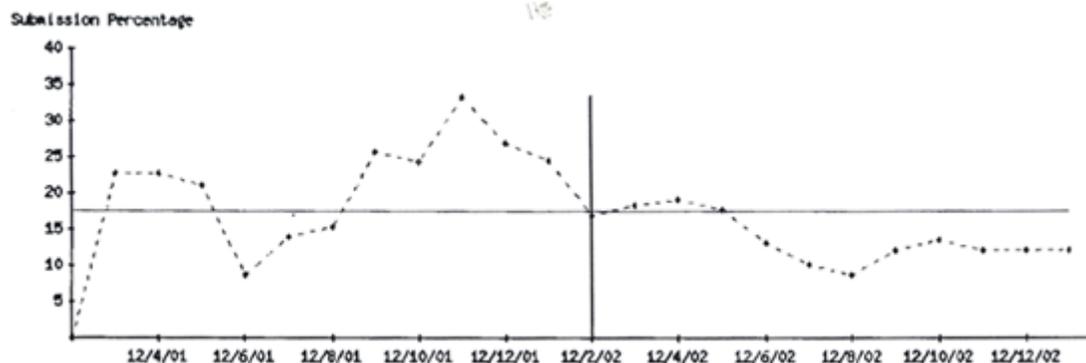
Other schools have also been wrestling with this question of property rights. At Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, officials considering a deal with Turnitin.com are mindful of students' privacy and copyrights. (Foster 2002) In an e-mail exchange I had with Bartow Culp, (Personal communication. January 8, 2003) a librarian

at Purdue University, he stated, "I feel there are serious intellectual property questions about Turnitin's policy of putting students' work into their database without consent. Until the company changes this policy, I don't think we should sign on." Those concerns contributed to the decision by officials at the University of California at Berkeley not to subscribe to Turnitin.com, says Mike R. Smith, Assistant Chancellor for Legal Affairs. "We take student intellectual property rights serious, and that became one of the trouble spots for us in moving ahead with the proposal" (Foster 2002). This is particularly significant since John M. Barrie began developing this software while he was a graduate student at Berkeley.

Knowing that this was a serious issue, and not wanting to embroil Hofstra in anything that might infringe on our students' rights, the Dean of the Library took the question to the University's legal department who, after studying the contract, assured us that we could subscribe to the service. In addition, we presented the question to both the Graduate and Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee of the University Senate and, after this collaboration, it was decided that Turnitin.com does not appear to be a threat to students' intellectual property rights and that the benefits derived from the service far outweighed the argument that students' rights might be jeopardized. Hofstra University is not alone in this decision. Four hundred universities in the United States and 700 higher-education institutions in Britain have subscribed to the service. Among the American universities that have subscribed is Duke University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Like Hofstra, Duke decided to subscribe after being assured that it was not an infringement of students' rights since nothing goes out of the database without students' express permission (Foster 2002).

Recently, Hofstra's Provost declared that the university is heading toward a zero tolerance for plagiarism and he encourages the faculty to report all instances of plagiarism. Nonetheless, Hofstra's faculty, like that of so many other schools, prefers not to be involved in the arduous red tape and emotional trauma stemming from a case of plagiarism. At the same time, they feel frustrated when they know that a student has blatantly plagiarized. That is why the plagiarism service that the library provides has taken on such importance. Obviously, faculty members feel more comfortable pressing charges against an offender when they have tangible evidence. Consequently, that is where the Axinn Library has played a vital role. Often Turnitin.com has provided the Hofstra faculty with the physical proof they needed to pursue their case. But, most importantly, we have found that the service has proven to be a powerful deterrent against plagiarism.

The following chart provided by Turnitin.com proves that the incidence of online plagiarism at Hofstra University is decreasing. The highest percentage of matching material from the Internet peaked at about 34% at the end of December 2001, the first year that we subscribed to their service. By the end of our second year, the amount of matching material had declined to about 12%.

"Deterring Plagiarism: a New Role for Librarians," Margaret Burke. *Library Philosophy and Practice* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 2004)

6

Submission Percentage

Material submitted by students at Hofstra University to Turnitin.com – December 2001-December 2002

Of course we are pleased with this decline and we feel that it is the consequence of our using Turnitin coupled with the more active stance assumed by Axinn Library librarians.

Role of the Librarian as Instructor

Librarians now have the chance to become trailblazers in educating students on the proper methods for conducting research in the current electronic environment. At Hofstra we subscribe to over 100 online databases, many of them full-text, and yet often students still turn to the Internet as their primary research tool. This is not necessarily their fault. The truth is that students, and many faculty members, are not aware that these rich sources of information are at their fingertips. Students do not understand the difference between these proprietary, authoritative research databases and the free-wheeling information found on the Internet. For that reason, more than ever, it is important for librarians to work with teaching faculty to strongly urge that they bring their classes to the library for instruction. How do we get this point across to faculty members?

In an effort to keep faculty up-to-date on all of our electronic databases and services, library liaisons have offered "brown bag" sessions. Since it is not always convenient for the faculty to come to the library, library liaisons have gone to the departments, equipped with a laptop, to demonstrate how to access our databases. These brown bag sessions have proven to be very successful. Once a faculty member becomes aware of the fact that these databases are available and that they are easy to access, they become missionaries and pass the word on to their colleagues. Subsequently many faculty members arrange to bring their classes to the library for bibliographic instruction.

If we judge by the bibliographic instruction statistics, it appears that faculty/library liaison is working. As seen in the following numbers, Axinn Library classes have risen significantly over the last four years:

Year	Classes
1998-1999	149
1999-2000	158
2000-2001	168
2001-2002	298

These figures indicate that Axinn librarians have been successful in their liaison work with the teaching faculty and there is no doubt that librarians will continue in their efforts to bring more students to the library for instruction.

Conclusion

The Axinn Library at Hofstra University is dedicated to helping students master the steps in the research process. In addition to the subject-specific classes that we offer, over the last two years we have introduced an elective one-credit class that introduces students to library information and technology. In these classes, librarians explain the research process, demonstrate how and when to cite sources, and we offer a detailed explanation of what constitutes plagiarism. We also describe how Turnitin.com functions.

Librarians must take initiative if we want students to view the library as a viable, user-friendly, authentic alternative to the Internet. At Axinn Library we are not trying to send a "Big Brother is watching" message to our students. At the same time, we do not want to be perceived as having our heads in the sand or the clouds. Technology has changed the learning environment and to ignore that fact would be foolhardy. As Morley Safer reported on *60 Minutes* , "The Web is like an arms race -- a constantly escalating contest of technology." If librarians let down their guard, in the end, students will be the losers of this race.

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"Deterring Plagiarism: a New Role for Librarians," Margaret Burke. *Library Philosophy and Practice* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 2004)

9