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Academic Integrity: A Sample Essay with Works Cited

The University of Virginia, whose student honor code dates from 1842, weathered a plagiarism scandal in May 2001, when 122 students were accused of copying research papers ("Cheating"). Virginia is not unique. Increasingly, universities are taking a get-tough stance against student plagiarism and cheating. Why? College students are welcomed into a worldwide academic community, one with a collegial atmosphere and high standards of academic integrity. Plagiarism is a serious violation of this integrity. In the words of a University of Colorado professor, plagiarism is "literary theft" (Silverman 12). At St. Louis Community College (STLCC), the *Faculty Resource Guide* states, "Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. A student who deliberately or unintentionally submits as his or her own work an assignment which is in any part taken from another person's work, without proper acknowledgement, is guilty of plagiarism" (15). But how can instructors know that students are submitting their own work, not papers bought on the Internet? Researchers make three suggestions: teach students how to research, assign unusual writing topics, and make students use a plagiarism detector.

Instructors must actively teach research and documentation. They cannot assume that students have had this training because high school and college students often copy whole paragraphs without giving credit to sources. Students unfamiliar with research need practice exercises to help them decide what needs citing (Harris, *Using Sources* 13-14). Such practice is crucial since research shows that "some students . . . view almost anything . . . on the Internet as general knowledge that does not require citation" (McCabe and Drinan 7). Some STLCC English

students must staple copies of sources used to their completed papers; they must also highlight information used so that instructors know they quoted, paraphrased, or summarized accurately, without plagiarizing. Instead of just dumping in quotes, students should learn the most basic rule of research: source material, whether quoted, paraphrased, or summarized, supports a writer's thesis by anticipating a reader's questions and need for proof. Thus, students should ask *what* a reader needs to know and *which* source best delivers that information. Students need this hands-on practice in researching.

Another strategy for thwarting plagiarism is to rethink essay assignment topics. Educators like retired English professor Robert Harris challenge instructors to stop assigning the same boring topics every semester (*Plagiarism* 124-5). Many STLCC instructors have already gotten creative. For example, history students have researched genealogy and compiled their family trees. Psychology students have analyzed gender stereotypes in color, theme, and sentiment of "Congratulations on Your New Baby" cards. These students *must* do their own writing. Quirky topics decrease chances that students can simply buy papers off the Internet.

Educators also advocate using plagiarism detectors as a "psychological deterrent" (Gooden et al. 445). These programs, such as *Turnitin*, flag suspicious wording so that students can rewrite in their own vocabulary and voice. Instructors want to reach inexperienced writers who plagiarize mistakenly. Teacher John Waltman defines *intentional* plagiarism as "wholesale copying . . . with the intention of representing [work] as one's own" and *unintentional* plagiarism as "careless paraphrasing and citing . . . such that improper or misleading credit is given" (qtd. in Lathrop and Foss 163). Such carelessness in crediting sources is often the result of "sloppily taken notes during the research process" (*MLA Handbook* 97). According to Dr. Vicki Ritts, professor of psychology at STLCC, some student plagiarists exhibit the illusion of invulnerability—the "other students might

get caught, but not me" attitude. Lafayette High School uses plagiarism detectors "not to hurt students, but rather to teach them," says English teacher Diane Tinucci (qtd. in Plattner 4).

Intentional plagiarism disheartens instructors, who call it "an act of aggression, a taunt behind a title page" (Silverman 12). Instructors see writing essays as an opportunity for students to learn about a topic. Writing tasks can not be outsourced. Yet some students ask why—if they're too busy and find the instructor too demanding—they can't have someone write for them. Appalled by the problem, universities are tackling student dishonesty:

> Many . . . colleges . . . have begun . . . to fight cheating by educating both faculty members and students on academic integrity. . . . "We need to pay more attention as students join our communities to explaining why this is such a core value—being honest in your academic work and why if you cheat that is a very big deal to us," said Kathleen Deignan, Princeton's dean of undergraduate students. . . . "We live in a world where . . . [moral rightness] is negotiable. . . . Academic institutions need to say, 'This is not negotiable.'" (Rimer 7)

Inexperienced writers often plagiarize by mistake. Obviously, the penalty varies with the severity of the offense and the writer's intention. In some cases, the unintentional plagiarist might be allowed to revise the paper. The intentional plagiarist will fail the course. Why? Members of the academic community do their own work in order to learn; students should as well. Simply put, trying to pass someone else's work off as your own is stealing.

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