News
Plagiarism Prevention Without Fear
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Could student plagiarism actually be reduced? And could it be reduced not through fear of being caught, but through ... education?

The evidence in **a study** released Monday suggests that the answer to both questions is Yes -- which could be welcome news to faculty members who constantly complain about students who either don't know what plagiarism is or don't bother to follow the rules about the integrity of assignments they prepare.

While many instructors have reported anecdotal evidence of the success of various techniques they have used in a few courses, this study is based on a much larger cohort, including a control group. The study found that a relatively short Web tutorial about academic integrity and plagiarism can have a significant impact on whether students plagiarize, with the greatest gains (for integrity) coming among student groups that are statistically more likely to plagiarize -- which are those with lesser academic credentials.

Further, surveys of the participants suggest that it was the education involved -- not fear of detection -- that led to the differences.

The study, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, is by Thomas S. Dee, associate professor of economics at Swarthmore College, and Brian A. Jacob, the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Education Policy at the University of Michigan.

The two scholars used 1,200 papers written by undergraduates in 28 humanities and social science courses at an unnamed, competitive institution of higher education. Students in some of the courses received no special instruction on plagiarism. Students in other randomly selected courses, however, were required to take a short online tutorial on plagiarism and were required to complete the exercise before they could hand in any papers. Demographic and other data were collected so that students could be analyzed by a variety of factors. The tutorial was based on the **Plagiarism Resource Site** jointly developed by Bates, Bowdoin and Colby Colleges.

In the tutorial, students saw a series of slides defining plagiarism, examples of correct and incorrect ways to use material in student papers, and strategies for avoiding plagiarism. There was then a brief online quiz, with prompts to review material that students may not have fully understood. Papers from the treatment and control groups were then tested (via Turnitin software and then other measures) for plagiarism, with the students never told that they were part of a plagiarism study.

The overall results found that students who went through the tutorial were less likely to plagiarize and that the impact was greatest on those with lower SAT scores than on others -- a factor that otherwise predicted an increased chance of plagiarism.

Then the researchers gave all of the students a survey of questions about plagiarism. Those who had gone through the Web education program were more likely than others to know what constitutes plagiarism and to feel confident of their knowledge. But the students in the two groups had similar answers to questions about whether they were concerned about plagiarism being detected or punished. So more knowledge of plagiarism didn't translate into more fear of being caught. This finding, the researchers say, suggests that the education was key to minimizing plagiarism in the treatment group, not any deterrent effect related to possible penalties.

Generally, higher education has embraced the use of plagiarism-detection software as a tool for enforcing academic integrity rules, and services such as Turnitin and SafeAssign have become a standard part of life for instructors and students alike at many campuses. At the same time, **many composition instructors** and **some others** have said that enforcement approaches to plagiarism are doomed to fail, as students never learn why the rules exist in the first place and are quite skilled at coming up with new ways to cheat.

Dee, in an interview, said that the research left him "somewhat agnostic" on the common practice of using plagiarism detection software. He said that the question is all about "how it's used," since students who lack knowledge of how to prevent plagiarism may go right on committing it.

"An instructor who uses the results of plagiarism detection software as a point of departure for educating students about ethical, effective writing practices would, I suspect, have more success," he said.

The study's results, he said, may be significant in helping college instructors consider the three choices to fighting plagiarism: the "moral suasion" approach, as in honor codes; the "law-and-order approach" of detection software and penalties; and the "educational approach" of teaching students what they should and shouldn't do. He said that while the research results favor the educational approach, that would only work with a change in faculty attitudes. "College instructors do not generally view issues related to educating students about plagiarism as part of their core responsibilities,"

Jacob agreed, saying that "faculty buy-in is critical" to an educational approach. "There are currently few incentives, and many disincentives, for faculty to be tough on student plagiarism," he said.

In their own courses, Jacob and Dee have resisted taking on the role of the plagiarism police. Jacob said, "I don't use any software, but this is mostly out of laziness and not personal conviction."

And Dee said that while he has done "relatively little" to teach his students about ethical writing practices, he plans to use the tutorial from the study in his future courses.

— **Scott Jaschik**