

Traffic School for Essay Thieves

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Having grown weary of punishing students for plagiarizing and advising other professors to fail them, too, Meg Files said that she had an epiphany during a random chat with a colleague at Pima Community College's West Campus. The professor explained that he had recently gone to traffic school after receiving a ticket and that the course had actually improved his driving.

"So I thought, 'Why can't we have a parallel program for plagiarism?' " said Files, who chairs Pima's English/journalism department.

Seizing on the idea, Files created a "traffic school for plagiarism," aimed at altering the campus's focus on catching and punishing students for turning in essays they didn't write. Now students can seek academic rehabilitation instead of punishment by participating in a plagiarism program that contains five steps:

Write a detailed, self-exam on "Why I plagiarized."

Read case studies of plagiarism. (Files said that many of the examples cover cases of professional journalists fired from their jobs.)

Write a paragraph defining plagiarism.

Meet with a tutor to discuss proper citation etiquette and complete a short worksheet on citations.

Meet with a faculty committee to talk about how to avoid plagiarism and lessons learned.

Files, who will be overseeing the program, said that it is too early to tell whether it will be successful. Only a few students have elected to sign up, and none have yet finished.

"My reaction is, good for them," said Donald L. McCabe, founding president of the [Center for Academic Integrity](#). McCabe, a professor of management and global business at Rutgers University, called Pima's approach a good policy that cuts down the middle between two extremes: excessively punishing students for literary piracy, or ignoring them. McCabe said that his own research finds that plagiarism is slightly more common today than in previous decades and that honor codes help curb the problem.

However, current policies at most educational institution revolve around detection and punishment. A number of universities now use online products such as [Turnitin.com](#) to scan essays for stolen text.

While catching students and then failing them for copying does help to reduce plagiarism, McCabe said that it probably doesn't provide the best results and may just teach students to be more careful when they cheat. "Now we are just teaching students how to avoid detection," he said.

Instructing students how to correctly reference other work and instilling a sense of academic integrity in them is difficult, McCabe said, but is the best way to dissuade students from plagiarizing.

“I like the focus — the remedial aspect instead of just playing gotcha,” said John P. Lesko, editor of [the new scholarly journal](#), Plagiary. Lesko pointed out that some students may not even know that plagiarism is a bad thing, and that copying is considered normal in some countries.

He noted that Carolyn Matalene, now professor emeritus of English language and literature at the University of South Carolina, noticed in the 1980s that [students in China](#) regularly pilfered lines from published pieces. “She found that copying was actually encouraged so that you would learn like the masters,” he said.

Files said that cultural differences in defining plagiarism also drove her develop the new program. “In some cultures, plagiarism isn’t bad,” she said. But she also found that the current policies at her institution were not going far enough. In the past, Pima tried to curb plagiarism by assigning original topics, which makes it more difficult for students to purchase an essay, and by emphasizing the writing process—outlining, drafting, revising—over delivering a finished product. Finally, faculty have been encouraging students to be confident and proud of their own writing. She calls these steps “prevention” and the new program a “cure” once plagiarism is found.

“I think it’s a worthwhile effort, but the motivation to plagiarize is huge,” said Colin Purrington, associate professor of evolutionary biology at Swarthmore College. Purrington became so concerned about the growing problem with plagiarism that he put up a [complete Web site](#) to address the issue a couple of years ago.

One of the resources he cites as a deterrent against plagiarism is an [essay that a Swarthmore student wrote](#) as a disciplinary measure after getting caught. The essay reads: “Plagiarism is undisputedly, a most egregious academic offense. Unfortunately, I found that out the hard way. I cannot even begin to describe how unpleasant the experience was for me.”

On his Web page, Purrington notes that the essay is nicely written and urges instructors to hand it out to students to generate discussion. But he also notes with some chagrin: “That person got caught again some years later.”

— [Paul D. Thacker](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/11/29/plagiarism>.

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