RESPONDING TO PLAGIARISM IN SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK: CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Recognizing the challenges of addressing plagiarism within schools of social work and diverse faculty opinion on the issue, our school of social work engaged in several efforts to clarify issues and establish consensus among the faculty. Issues that required clarification included: definitions of plagiarism, steps to take when confronted with suspected plagiarism, the role of the administrative disciplinary committee, and the range of consequences. At a minimum, consensus was needed regarding faculty steps in confronting suspected plagiarism to ensure equitable treatment of students and to fulfill the school’s role as a gatekeeper to the profession. This article describes the concerns, steps, and outcomes of the work that was conducted. We offer recommendations and invite further professional discussion about this educational issue.

CONCERNS ABOUT STUDENT PLAGIARISM and other forms of academic misconduct are found throughout the higher education literature and are a fairly frequent topic in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Leatherman, 1999; Schneider, 1999). Numerous studies have identified plagiarism as common in undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools (Bailey, 2001; Cummings, Maddux, Harlow, & Dyas, 2002). While plagiarism and other forms of cheating clearly are understood to be highly unethical at any educational level, they may warrant more severe consequences within graduate professional schools that have a formal code of ethics that is articulated and taught during the course of professional training. A profession such as social work, which is grounded in values and ethics, may have a special obligation to address effectively any form of student misconduct because it can affect the school’s learning climate, as well as send messages to students about who is and who is not appropriate for the profession.

This article describes efforts at one school of social work to develop consensus regarding plagiarism-related issues. Faculty consensus was needed to ensure equitable treatment in the identification and handling of cases of student plagiarism and to fulfill the school’s professional gatekeeping function regarding ethical behavior. This article can assist other social work programs in considering a number of complex issues related to student plagiarism and provide guidelines for deciding consequences for academic misconduct. We describe typical dilemmas faced by schools in determining the seriousness of academic
misconduct, suggest approaches and methods for confronting students with their behavior, and identify a range of possible consequences that could be imposed in the context of potential mitigating factors. Reflected in the article are the experiences of the faculty and administrators of one school of social work, particularly those who serve on the Status Review Committee, the group charged with disciplining students engaged in academic misconduct. The broad involvement of these groups and a multifaceted approach to the problem helped the school move forward in developing strategies to prevent and address plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct.

There can be widespread disagreement and misunderstanding regarding the definition of plagiarism. For clarity in this article, we provide the definition of plagiarism our faculty adopted through the deliberations described in this article:

Plagiarism is the act of representing someone else's creative or academic work as one's own whether in full or in part. It can be an act of commission, in which one intentionally appropriates the words, pictures, or ideas of another; or it can be an act of omission, in which one fails to acknowledge/document/give credit to the source, creator, or the copyright owners of those words, pictures, or ideas. Any fabrication (i.e., making up) of materials, quotes, or sources other than that created in a work of fiction, is also plagiarism.

**Literature Review**

The social work education literature has addressed issues of plagiarism, although not extensively. Most notably, more than a decade ago, Saunders (1993) provided a thorough and thoughtful article addressing concerns about plagiarism in schools of social work, concluding, “The social work profession is not served by allowing dishonest students to graduate from its educational program: An unethical student is likely to be an unethical practitioner” (p. 231). Saunders described departmental policies at one school of social work that included notifying incoming students about the plagiarism policy, obtaining signatures in agreement with the National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics, and convening a hearing to address suspected plagiarism. In addition to a review of the legal issues involved in cases of plagiarism, Saunders also notes some extralegal issues that may arise in such cases. For example, some school environments may discourage reporting or dealing with cases of plagiarism in part to avoid potential litigation. In conclusion, he notes, “Every instructor must make a decision that he or she believes is ethically defensible in cases of student academic dishonesty” (Saunders, 1993, p. 231). More recent articles in the social work education literature have focused on specific facets of plagiarism, particularly the role played by the Internet (Gibelman, Gelman, & Fast, 1999).

Social work, however, is not the only profession concerned with plagiarism; several articles throughout the academic literature have addressed these issues in schools of nursing (Bailey, 2001); education (Cummings et al., 2002; Love & Simmons, 1998); law (LeClercq, 1999); medicine (Wagner, 1993); dental medicine (Tankersley, 1997); and psychology (Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Lang, 1997). Wagner (1993) reports on medical school responses
to academic misconduct, particularly in light of recent legal decisions. He argues that fact finding (e.g., determining that plagiarism did occur: who, what, when, where, how) should be the first priority in an academic misconduct hearing and that “mental state” would become relevant if a finding of academic misconduct was made. Mental state is distinguished by the extent to which the “perpetrator has some awareness that he or she may be doing something wrong” (Wagner, 1993, p. 888). Higher levels of personal awareness would be treated with more severity than lesser levels.

One study (Fly et al., 1997) examined the ethical transgressions of psychology graduate students by conducting a mail survey of training directors. Of the 89 incidents reported (by a sample of 75 respondents), 25% involved a violation of confidentiality, 20% professional boundaries, 15% plagiarism or falsification of data, 10% behavior that placed a client at risk, 10% a procedural breach with ethical implications, 9% competency, 8% integrity or dishonesty, and 3% misrepresentation of credentials. Respondents reported that 54% of the students who committed these acts had already taken an ethics course. The two most common actions taken in response to ethical transgressions were some kind of remedial action, such as requiring restitution or putting the student on probation (44%), and dismissal from the program (22%).

Conducting a qualitative study involving students in a graduate school of education, Love and Simmons (1998) identified several factors inhibiting students from committing cheating and plagiarism. These included internal positive factors (personal confidence, positive professional ethics, fairness to authors, desire to work or learn, and fairness to others), internal negative factors (fear, guilt), and external factors (professors’ knowledge of material in the field, probability of being caught, time requirement [cheating/plagiarism took too much time], cheating as dangerous [e.g., manipulation of data that may have harmful consequences to others], type of work required [i.e., assignments did not lend themselves to plagiarism], and need for actual knowledge of the subject matter in the future). Additionally, the authors identified several factors contributing to the commission of plagiarism. These included internal factors, such as negative personal attitudes, lack of awareness, and lack of competency, and external factors, such as grade pressure, time pressure, task pressure (having to complete multiple assignments at once), and professors’ leniency or unwillingness to confront cheating and plagiarism.

Among the plagiarism-related topics that have been researched and reported on in the literature, one common area concerns the extent to which students understand the act of plagiarism. For example, Overbey and Guiling (1999) conducted research on students’ perceptions of plagiarism and found that except for the direct copying of large amounts of text, many students do not understand clearly what constitutes plagiarism. Conducting research that found more examples of student plagiarism with complicated text versus simpler text, Roig (1999) suggests that students are aware of the rules for paraphrasing text, but that they will “use writing strategies that result in potential plagiarism when they face the task of paraphrasing advanced technical text for which they may lack the proper cognitive resources with which to process it” (p. 979). Consequently,
some instances of plagiarism may be avoided when student writing skills are improved. LeClercq (1999) has called attention to the inaccurate assumption by law school faculty that “their students arrive knowing how to avoid plagiarizing. Law faculty apparently believes that students are taught all about plagiarism in undergraduate school and arrive at the law school doors well grounded in the rules and underlying principles of academia. They also assume that students are ethical, moral, and hardworking” (p. 239).

In sum, the literature has identified that plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are fairly common in all types of higher education settings. Issues discussed in the literature include: proper procedures for addressing plagiarism, understanding student intent, the role of students’ level of knowledge and skill, and the relationship of plagiarism to ethical practice. Although no study of the prevalence of plagiarism in social work schools has been conducted, there is no reason to think that schools of social work are not faced with the problem of plagiarism and that faculty and administrators do not face challenges in handling these situations. Thus, following Saunders (1993), we report on our school’s experience with developing an approach to plagiarism that guards the academic integrity of the school, the professional integrity of future social workers, and the rights of individual students when dealing with incidents of plagiarism.

**Addressing Plagiarism in Our School of Social Work**

Prior to the start of our school’s intense review of its approach to plagiarism, formal disciplinary procedures existed and were implemented by the school’s Status Review Committee, a standing committee of faculty whose members are appointed by the dean to review whether students experiencing problems should remain in the program. In addition to reviewing cases of plagiarism and academic misconduct, the committee reviews the cases of students exhibiting academic or field problems.

Although procedures were in place for handling cases that came to the attention of the Status Review Committee, there were no formal procedures for individual faculty members who suspected plagiarism to follow. As occasional cases of plagiarism came to the attention of the committee, members noted wide-ranging opinion among faculty members as to the seriousness of plagiarism and appropriate consequences. They noted a further diversity of opinion when classroom instructors whose students had submitted plagiarized papers met with the committee and recommended either harsh or lenient punishment. This diversity of opinion is demonstrated by the following composite comments, which are illustrative of the sentiments of faculty members:

- Much of what we think of as plagiarism is our students’ lack of understanding of how to do correct citations.
- My son was taught about plagiarism when he was in high school; it is unlikely that our students in graduate school would not know how to do correct citations.
- If a student can allow herself to plagiarize an academic paper, will she be fabricating client records or submitting false billing in a few years?
- Some students don’t have the benefit of a quality high school or college education
and may not even have been raised in the United States. Establishing rules that are too stringent or making assumptions about what everyone should know about plagiarism can penalize the type of student who will eventually make a very good social worker.

- This is a very good student who's committed a one-time offense. It's wrong to have an off-with-their-head response.
- I'm sure there have been times when I had a stack of papers to grade and a tight deadline, when I wasn't as fastidious about checking citations as I could have been. I've probably let some cases of plagiarism go by, and I'm sure that many faculty have. We shouldn't be severe with students whose instructor happened to catch it when we know we've probably let other cases go by.
- Wouldn’t it be better if we were focusing on methods for preventing it rather than how to punish it?

These and a variety of other sentiments reflected wide-ranging perceptions about the definition of plagiarism, the reasons for it, and appropriate responses. Moreover, it became clear to us that when some faculty discover that a student in their class has committed plagiarism, this calls up painful and conflicting feeling for the faculty member. Faculty members experienced self-doubt: “Were my standards so high that students felt they could not achieve them?” “Did students perceive me as so lenient or inattentive that they thought I wouldn’t catch this or wouldn’t confront them?” “Did I actually give directions that implied that sharing papers between students or using quotes from the Internet would be acceptable?”

Faculty members reported feeling betrayed and angry with students, then feeling guilty about being angry. Recognizing such diversity of opinion, we determined the need to have fuller discussions, gather relevant information, review current policy, and develop some consensus to ensure that our procedures regarding plagiarism were fair to students and upheld professional standards.

**Multifaceted Approach**

Although school policy was in place to address cases of suspected plagiarism, a faculty meeting was used to poll instructors about their comfort in dealing with the issue and whether additional guidelines would be helpful. Faculty responded that additional guidelines would be greatly appreciated. A multifaceted approach was used to address faculty concerns: (a) a subcommittee was formed to collect and synthesize definitions and examples of plagiarism, as well as examples of other types of academic misconduct; (b) the associate dean was commissioned to prepare a list of steps that faculty should take in the face of suspected plagiarism; and (c) a series of teaching colloquia were conducted in 2002–2003 to inform faculty of the school’s plagiarism policy, to facilitate faculty input regarding appropriate responses to plagiarism, and to discuss whether policy changes were needed.

This information-gathering and deliberative process took place over 2 semesters. Key actors were the associate dean for academic affairs, the director of student services, the chair of the Status Review Committee, a professor with responsibility for the Teaching Effectiveness Program, and the assistant dean of field education. In the 1st semester, key tasks
included the initial polling of instructors about the issue within a faculty meeting, the gathering of various definitions of plagiarism within and outside the university (conducted by the director of student services), the development of guidelines for faculty to follow when suspicious of plagiarism (developed by the associate dean for academic affairs), a discussion of the definitions and steps with faculty in two additional meetings, and the eventual update of the Faculty Handbook with the final, agreed-upon guidelines. In the 2nd semester, further attention was paid to consequences. A subcommittee was formed (chair of the Status Review Committee, assistant dean of field education, and two faculty members with experience on the Status Review Committee) to discuss the disposition of previous cases and to develop a draft template categorizing types of plagiarism by the level of seriousness and the appropriate range of consequences. Later in the semester, the chair of the Status Review Committee facilitated two teaching colloquia with the larger faculty. The first colloquium focused on the presentation of information about types of cases the committee had seen and the disposition of these cases. Discussion with faculty at the colloquium led to further refinement of the template that is provided in Table 1. At the second colloquium, a fictional case study was presented to help faculty further grapple with the complexity of handling these cases.

Understanding Plagiarism: Definition and Types

Our first area of discussion involved understanding the definition and types of plagiarism. Various definitions of plagiarism were collected, reviewed, and synthesized.

In the introductory section of this paper, we provided the definition that we adopted and printed in the student handbook. Additional clarification in the handbook states that plagiarism also includes, but is not limited to, activities such as:

- Copying or substantially restating the work of another person or persons on any examination, assigned paper, or any other oral or written work without citing the appropriate source, including books, journal articles, magazines or newspaper stories, published or unpublished papers, or reports or Web site sources.
- Using work done by another student without permission or without acknowledging his or her contributions in the introduction, endnotes, references, or the like.
- Copying material verbatim without using quotation marks or without citing the real source of that material.
- Translating a source directly from another language into English and using it as though the content originated with the student.
- Hiring a ghostwriter or purchasing a paper and submitting it as one’s own original work.
- Presenting collaborative work as one’s own without acknowledging others’ contributions, whether in a course where the work will be graded individually or in another forum (e.g., professional conference) where only one person’s work will be credited.

A continuing point of contention was whether intent was required as an element of plagiarism. According to most definitions of
plagiarism intent is not required; thus we determined that inadvertent plagiarism was still a case of plagiarism. However, we agreed that level of intent might be considered a mitigating factor in determining the disposition of the case. This is discussed more fully below.

Helping Faculty Members Respond to Suspected Plagiarism

To assist individual faculty members when confronted with a suspicion of plagiarism, the associate dean, in consultation with other faculty and administrators, developed procedures for faculty to follow. A summary of the key pieces of the recommended steps is provided below. A more detailed description of these steps can be obtained from the authors.

First, faculty members are instructed to meet with the student who is suspected of plagiarism. They should bring a photocopy of (a) the student’s paper that contains the plagiarized material, and (b) the source of the plagiarized material if available (e.g., textbook, journal article, Web site information, another student’s paper). If two or more students are involved, the faculty member should speak with each individually, illustrating with evidence the suspected plagiarism and hearing the student’s response. A copy of all materials related to the situation (e.g., the student’s e-mails explaining how the situation occurred) should be kept. The faculty member should explain to the student that suspicion of plagiarism is an automatic cause for referral to the Status Review Committee, and, therefore, the process is out of the hands of the faculty member. The faculty member does not need to convince the student that the evidence shows plagiarism; she need only state that there are grounds for a Status Review Committee process. The faculty member should then defer further conversation with the student about the incident until the Status Review Committee meeting. This will minimize the likelihood that the faculty member will be pressured to overlook the situation, be misquoted, or get into details of the student’s motives or personal life that should be reserved for the Status Review Committee process. Students who are expecting a course grade can be told that no grade will be given until the Status Review Committee process has been completed, as the decision of the committee may influence whether the student does or does not pass the course.

Other steps the faculty member needs to take include writing a letter to the dean to request a referral for a Status Review Committee meeting to investigate the circumstances and submitting a written statement to the committee spelling out the issues and providing documentation. The faculty member also might need to attend the meeting. Faculty members are informed that prior to speaking to the student about the incident (the first step), the faculty member can consult with the associate dean for academic affairs for another opinion as to whether the evidence warrants suspicion of plagiarism and referral to the Status Review Committee. Additionally, faculty members are asked to inform the associate dean of the name of the student so that any pattern established by the student across classes can be identified.

Three further recommendations for faculty are provided: (1) respect your intuition, professional values, and the written evidence in following through with students; (2) the process is and feels accusatory, so student anger, defensiveness, or tearfulness are not unusual—stick
to observable evidence and remain calm and respectful; and (3) remain open to evidence that might disconfirm your suspicion.

**Clarifying Appropriate Consequences**

The next area of discussion among faculty involved the ways the Status Review Committee had responded to cases in the past and recommendations for the future. The Status Review Committee wanted to reflect the will of the faculty and recognized that there were divergent opinions and approaches to be considered. Establishing some consensus would help to ensure that students were treated fairly and that the school was consistent in its role of maintaining professional ethics. Four reasons were identified as to why plagiarism cases seemed particularly challenging. First, it was perceived that only some cases of plagiarism were referred to the Status Review Committee and that some faculty were more likely than others to notice it or bring it to the attention of the committee. This made it difficult to impose severe consequences on the cases brought to the committee's attention. Second, some faculty members had a difficult time understanding the nuances of actions that constituted plagiarism. If faculty members had such difficulty, was it not reasonable that students would also? Third, faculty found it difficult to assess students' level of intention and understanding of the wrongfulness of their actions. Finally, the range of consequences was felt to be inadequate—some seemed too lenient, others too severe. In addition, faculty members noted a sense of desperation on the part of these students and a lack of rational thinking at the time they committed plagiarism; there are often complex factors that provide the context for students' behavior.

Over the course of two teaching colloquia and during subcommittee meetings in preparation for those colloquia, three key issues were examined: levels of seriousness, appropriate consequences, and potential mitigating factors. These issues were discussed in the context of cases that had been brought to the committee. Nine cases of suspected academic misconduct were handled by the Status Review Committee between 1997 and 2002. The types of academic misconduct included: using text from the Internet or a text book (three cases), copying a paper from another student (four cases), getting inappropriate assistance on a take-home exam (one case), and fabricating an assignment that required data collection (one case). A template for categorizing cases was developed and refined with faculty input (Table 1).

**Levels of seriousness.** Three levels of seriousness were identified by the four-member subcommittee primarily based on experience with cases of plagiarism and reflecting amount and intent: minor, moderate, and severe. It was determined that relatively minor instances of plagiarism (e.g., poor use of citations, evidence of misunderstanding the assignment, or a student whose paper was unknowingly used by other students) could be dealt with outside the Status Review Committee process. Individual faculty members were asked to consult with the associate dean for academic affairs if they were uncertain whether the assignment warranted attention from the Status Review Committee. Even if the case ultimately was not referred to the committee due to the minor level of seriousness, the faculty member could still impose her own consequences (e.g., rewrite of assignment, or a homework assignment directed to writing citations).
Responding to Plagiarism

Moderate and severe cases were distinguished by the intent/awareness of the student, the amount of material plagiarized, and the involvement of other students. Thus, moderate cases were those in which: (a) the student appeared to be only somewhat aware of the seriousness of the behavior at the time of the plagiarism, (b) the amount of plagiarism was not extensive and did not involve word-for-word copying, and (c) the plagiarism was from a printed or Internet source so that no other students were affected.

Severe cases were those in which: (a) the student appeared to be fully aware of her actions at the time of the plagiarism; (b) a large amount of material was plagiarized and it was

### TABLE 1. Levels, Definitions, and Consequences for Plagiarism and Cheating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Seriousness</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>- No awareness/genuine mistake/misunderstanding (e.g., poor use of citations, original student paper unknowingly used by others)</td>
<td>- May be dealt with outside of status review process; consequences imposed by individual faculty member</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Rewrite of assignment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- “Homework assignment” re: plagiarism, citations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>- Semi-awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Moderate amount—not quite word for word but general copying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- From printed or Internet source (rather than student)</td>
<td>- Failing grade in course (repeat if required course or substitute if elective)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Apology to instructor and other students involved</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Not allowed to participate in graduation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- “Homework assignment” re: plagiarism/citations and/or write personal statement reflecting on lesson learned</td>
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<td>- Asked to reflect on the steps/decision points that occurred that led to plagiarism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- “Monitoring” of student by chair or other key person (in addition to faculty advisor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>- Full-awareness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Large amount (pages) and word-for-word</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Copying from other students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Purchase of paper or paying student</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- All of the above, plus</td>
<td>- Leave of absence or expulsion unless ameliorating circumstances</td>
</tr>
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Key Mediating Factors to be Considered

- Early and genuine acceptance of responsibility
- Severe stress (not general academic stress; job-related stress, family responsibilities or minor illness)
- Context of other academic/classroom/field behavioral pattern of “cutting corners” in other situations
- Place in program (amount of program completed)
essentially word-for-word; and (c) copying was
done from other students' papers or through
the purchase of papers written by others, thus
implicating other students who were innocent
of plagiarism.

Range of consequences. A range of conse-
quences has been imposed by the committee
in cases of plagiarism. These included: getting
an "F" in the course and having the student
repeat the course if it was required or a sub-
title course if it was an elective; apologizing to
the instructor or any other students who were
inadvertently involved and whose status at
the school was put in jeopardy; not allowing
students to participate in graduation exercises if
the plagiarism occurred just before graduation;
completing a written assignment regarding
plagiarism or a personal statement reflecting
on the steps/decision points that led to the
plagiarism incident and how these might be
avoided in the future, or some combination.
One additional consequence has been added as
a result of the faculty discussions: monitoring
of students if they remain in the program. The
faculty decided that in the future, if the student
was allowed to continue in the program, the
chair and faculty advisor could review further
work of the student to look for signs of plagia-
rism; this would reinforce to the student how
seriously the school views plagiarism.

Potential mitigating factors. Based on a re-
view of the cases that had been considered by
the Status Review Committee, several factors
were identified that seemed to influence the
committee’s decision regarding consequences.
These included: the extent to which the student
took responsibility for his actions, the student’s
academic and field record, whether other stu-
dents were involved, how far along the student
was in the program, and the extent/type of per-
sonal and school-related stress experienced by
the student. Although these factors were iden-
tified in retrospect as having had an effect on
the committee’s decision making, they had not
been explicitly identified as mitigating factors
during the handling of the cases. Preparation
for the colloquia provided the opportunity to
reflect on and articulate the reasoning behind
considering these factors.

Student's responsibility. There was general
consensus that individual faculty members and
the Status Review Committee as a whole tended
to take a more understanding approach when
students took responsibility for their actions,
saw that their actions had been dishonest and
hurtful, and faced up to the consequences.
Students who behaved in this manner probably
would be responded to with more leniency
than those who denied the plagiarism, blamed
others, or were hostile about the need to have
a hearing on their status at the school. This
faculty tendency to respond to students who
accepted responsibility was not unique to cases
of plagiarism, but to the wide variety of prob-
lems that students experience in the graduate
program. Taking responsibility was considered
a sign of maturity and thought to bode well for
the student's future professional life.

This faculty perspective, however, could
be complicated by several elements. Unless
the plagiarized document could be located,
there would be no solid proof of plagiarism;
hence, student denial of the offense had to
be considered as a legitimate possibility. Fur-
thermore, it was observed that virtually all
students tended to take responsibility and be
very sorry once they realize the consequences
that could be imposed, including dismissal.
It could be challenging for the committee to distinguish a student's genuine remorse from feigned remorse.

_Student's academic and field record._ On the one hand, when a student had an otherwise good academic and field record, the plagiarism was more likely to be viewed as an aberration for an otherwise promising social worker; thus, leniency might be considered. On the other hand, it was problematic that a student with evidence of academic capability would resort to plagiarism to complete assignments. In some cases it was the marginal student who elicited empathy because of faculty members’ recognition of the student’s academic and personal struggles, and it served as more convincing evidence of the excuse that the student did not understand that she was plagiarizing.

Similarly, when a student excelled in the field but had a mediocre academic record, including being suspected of plagiarism, there might be some discussion as to the relative importance of practice performance versus academic performance. While plagiarism activity would not be condoned, the question might be raised: “Aren’t there far more serious ethical transgressions we should worry about as a school of social work (e.g., boundary violations or confidentiality)?” Some would argue that programs that prepare students for careers in journalism, history, or creative writing might view plagiarism as the penultimate ethical violation but that social work should not view it in quite the same way—in part because our profession does not teach about it in the same way that these other fields do. Conversely, and more commonly, the opinion was that plagiarism represents an ethical violation and regardless of whether this violation occurs in the classroom or in the field, raises questions about the student’s ability to become an ethical social worker.

_Involvement of other students._ Using another student’s written paper generally has been viewed as more serious than copying from a text because it involved the violation of a relationship as well as academic dishonesty. While obviously more serious when stealing from another student, the majority of the cases involved “borrowing” from another student to view how she approached the assignment—which quickly led to copying from the material. The student from whom the material was borrowed usually had willingly shared her assignment with the understanding that she was helping a student colleague format the assignment or see how to approach the assignment, not with the understanding that the material would be copied. Consistently, the committee has not seriously punished the student lending the paper, having been convinced in each case that the lending student did her own work and did not share the paper with the knowledge that the borrowing student’s intent was plagiarism.

_Amount of program completed._ Plagiarism has been committed at all points in the academic program. Cases occurring earlier in the program can be viewed with greater leniency if there is evidence of misunderstanding of the assignment. The committee can use the situation to educate the student (with appropriate disciplinary action) but allow her to continue in the program. Conversely, it is particularly disheartening when a student is about to graduate from the program and an incident of plagiarism occurs. One expects
that students will have internalized academic skill and ethical behavior by the end of the master's program. Despite the faculty's higher expectations of students toward the end of the program, the committee has been reluctant to impose severe punishment (i.e., dismissal), and in most cases students have been able to finish their degree after receiving an “F” in the course and completing an alternative course.

Extent/type of personal and school-related stress. Invariably, students report great stress as being a key factor in their plagiarism. Occasionally, students face unusual and severe stress (e.g., sudden death of a partner or child, violent victimization, or eviction) that may affect their ability to think rationally. While we would want students to share such information with a faculty member and ask for an extension on the assignment, we believe it is possible that under such severe circumstances an otherwise ethical student might make a poor decision to plagiarize an assignment. The types of stress that would cause us to consider the circumstances to be mitigating would need to be both sudden and severe. These situations are rare but do occur.

Many students argue that they are stressed out by graduate school and have long-standing personal stressors (e.g., family responsibilities or stressful full-time jobs). While students do face several academic and field challenges and have stressful outside obligations, we generally have not been swayed by these types of arguments for committing plagiarism. We try to convey to students that the ability to cope with numerous stressors is a key skill in successful social work practice and this ability is needed when practicing in the field to avoid potential harm to clients.

**Increasing Faculty Consensus**

A written case study was developed to further discussion of levels of seriousness, consequences, and mitigating factors. It was particularly helpful to faculty members who had not served on the Status Review Committee and so had limited exposure to the challenges of plagiarism cases. In the absence of experience with real cases, it appeared easier for faculty members to have strong and extreme opinions. Use of a fictionalized case study helped faculty members understand some of the complexity of these cases.

**Case Study**

Jen is a clinical student in the 2nd semester of her 2nd year. She has been a full-time student in continuous attendance. In her 2nd year policy elective, child welfare policy, the assignment was to review a problem area in child welfare, to analyze it, and to develop policy recommendations. In reading the assignment submitted, the instructor found that the recommendations section differed in tone from other parts of the paper, reading more like an authentic policy analysis than one that is typically written by students.

When confronted, the student initially expressed surprise and anger, suggesting that “this school has been unfair to me since Day 1.” Later, when discussing the incident, she said that in the course of doing her research she found the report on a Web site, downloaded it, and used the format to organize her paper. She said she “never meant to do anything wrong” and that in her haste to complete the assignment, she “must have used more from the original report than [she] had intended to.” The rest of her paper did contain her own work using library resources.
and integrating research articles. To explain her actions she also stated, "The professor said that we should use the Internet to do some of our research and she brought an example of a policy report that she had downloaded from the Internet," and, "I talked with other students about how they were doing the paper and they did the same thing."

The student reports that the 2 years in graduate school have been very stressful. She has had chronic health problems, has terminated a major relationship, and has had to move to a new apartment three times. At this point, she "just wanted to get through" the assignment, the course, and the MSW program. She admits to doing a sloppy job in this paper but didn’t feel she has done anything wrong. She has a 3.3 GPA, with noticeably better work in clinical classes than in policy and research classes. Feedback from professors also suggested that her clinical work and insight were strong, but policy and research professors reported absences, bad attitude, and sloppy work.

1. Is there any other information that is needed to make a decision on this case?
2. What should be the disposition?
3. What if: There is a report that in the 1st semester of her first field placement there was a meeting to discuss her tendency to "cut corners" in her work (e.g., incomplete agency paperwork, late/poorly written process recordings, or making some minor decisions without informing her supervisor), but she then showed improvement and there were no further field difficulties?

What if: One professor reports that she was an excellent classroom participant, took leadership in a group project, completed all assignments with high quality, and will make a top-notch social worker, while another professor says she was frequently absent or late, appeared unprepared for class, was dismissive of colleagues, and did average work on written assignments but "demanded" higher grades?

What if: The student states that she misunderstood the assignment and the professor was unclear in her instructions?

4. Anything else that would or should make a difference in the disposition?

There was discussion among faculty about whether mitigating circumstances should ever matter. Some thought that they should as they often do in adult life; others thought that mitigating circumstances were not relevant. Additionally, some concerns were expressed that the consequences of plagiarism were not severe enough. Some faculty felt that student misconduct is often a symptom of a more serious personality disorder and that much more severe consequences were warranted in such instances. There was discussion as to whether depriving students of the opportunity to walk in graduation ceremonies was a legitimate consequence to be imposed on students or would result in public humiliation because the student would need to tell family not to attend and classmates would know the student was not present. It was determined that this had been used only in cases where students were at the end of the program and were required to take another course because of receiving an "F" related to the plagiarized assignment.
Finally, the case study stimulated dialogue as to whether students committing plagiarism were aware that their actions were wrong. It was recommended that we could do more to make new students aware of the seriousness of plagiarism (e.g., make them sign a statement saying that they understand what plagiarism is and that there are associated consequences). Some faculty thought that no matter what preventive measures are adopted by the school, stress and desperation might cloud student decision making.

Outcomes

The outcomes resulting from our work to address plagiarism included: (1) raising faculty awareness about addressing plagiarism; (2) clarifying procedures for faculty to follow in suspected cases; (3) determining a range of consequences so that the disposition fits the case; and (4) raising student awareness about plagiarism, its definition and consequences, and the seriousness with which the school approaches it.

Raising faculty awareness. This occurred via the series of teaching colloquia described. Although originally intended to gather input from faculty about their views, it also served to inform faculty about overarching patterns (e.g., types of plagiarism, types of circumstances, or consequences imposed) throughout the school, rather than allowing assumptions to be made based on the anecdotal experiences of individual faculty.

Our procedures did not specifically assist faculty members in detecting plagiarism and we recognize that some instructors may be more skilled, detailed, or inquisitive than others and thus are more likely to detect a plagiarized assignment. By discussing the issue of plagiarism at the school level over the course of 2 semesters, we believe that we have raised awareness among those who previously may not have considered the prospect of student plagiarism. Moreover, by having school-wide discussions and establishing procedures, we were able to convey that the school took this issue seriously and that faculty members would not be alone if they were to raise this issue with a student. During the course of the process, some faculty members attended university-sponsored seminars on detecting plagiarism via computer searchers. Although this information was made available to the faculty, we concluded that these computerized services generally do not lend themselves to the nature of assignments in our school (i.e., they are more appropriate for undergraduate term papers).

Clarifying faculty procedures. By clarifying faculty procedures, we were able to ensure a standardized response to suspicions of plagiarism and reduce the likelihood of having students treated differently by various faculty members. Additionally, providing these steps also serves to protect the faculty members from personalized pleas or accusations of students. In particular, the steps describe referral to the Status Review Committee as an automatic action. Recording these steps is particularly helpful to part-time adjunct faculty who have more limited involvement with the school.

Determining range of consequences. Presentation of the range of potential consequences of plagiarism and discussion about the circumstances in which more or less severe consequences appear warranted served to validate and reinforce faculty views that: (a) cases of plagiarism are treated seriously in the school
with potential consequences, such as suspension or dismissal, and (b) attention to the type of plagiarism that occurred and circumstances in which it occurred help to ensure that the response is appropriate to the individual case.

_Raising student awareness._ In addition to defining plagiarism in the student handbook, we also added a statement to the student handbook clarifying the circumstances under which: (a) students could collaborate on a paper, and (b) students could get credit for a paper already submitted to another instructor to fulfill a course requirement. We engaged in other efforts to raise student awareness about plagiarism. The following statement is now placed on each syllabus:

Papers and presentations in the School of Social Work must meet standards of academic honesty and integrity, avoiding any possibility of plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. For specific information about the [school's] policy regarding academic misconduct, see [student handbook].

Additionally, we encouraged faculty to discuss within classes the problem of plagiarism and to talk in greater depth with students about particular assignments and what types of behavior would be plagiarism in the context of the assignment. This seemed particularly necessary since there are many different types of assignments given by faculty.

Other suggestions related to prevention were discussed but have not been implemented yet. These included: addressing plagiarism at student orientation, using the faculty advisor relationship to convey information about plagiarism, having students sign a statement regarding their understanding of plagiarism, and conducting focus groups with students to gain information about their perspective on issues related to plagiarism.

_Unintended consequences._ It was the intent of our process that incidents of plagiarism would be treated in an equitable manner (i.e., similar types of cases would be treated similarly) and that greater attention to the issue of plagiarism by faculty would result in more informed students and, eventually, a decrease in the number of plagiarism incidents. There are, however, two unintended consequences that may have resulted from our efforts. First, making faculty more attuned to issues of plagiarism may have resulted in more cases of plagiarism coming to the attention of the Status Review Committee. Since the establishment of these procedures, three more cases of suspected plagiarism have been referred to the committee. The number of cases of plagiarism has been small, both before and after our concentrated efforts, so it is not possible to determine that more attention led to more cases. In two of the three recent cases, the evidence was substantial and it was likely that these cases would have been identified without our school-wide focus on the issue.

Second, we have found that as we define plagiarism and appropriate procedures more explicitly, additional "loopholes" can be found. Despite our efforts to be comprehensive and systematic, there continue to be unique, unanticipated situations. For example, although we have a comprehensive list of examples of plagiarism in the student handbook, a case arose of a type not listed in the handbook. The student then attempted to argue his case (unsuccessfully) in part based on the fact that the
type of plagiarism was not on the list. Similarly, while the outlined procedures provide guidance to faculty, not every possible scenario can be covered. The lesson we have learned from this is that while specificity is important and needed, the faculty also need to understand and communicate to students the essence of the act of plagiarism. Essentially, they need to see the forest and not get lost in the trees.

Effectiveness evaluation. We have not gathered specific data about the effectiveness of our efforts to address plagiarism. We do, however, offer some thoughts about how the effectiveness might be evaluated. Our primary goal has been to ensure equity in the treatment of cases. Therefore, we might survey faculty regarding their willingness to address cases of plagiarism through the formal procedures (i.e., referral to the Status Review Committee) rather than through informal resolution. Additionally, we might continue to monitor the handling of the cases by the Status Review Committee to identify the types of cases, the circumstances, and the consequences imposed. These data are currently available in student files. Because of the small number of cases, however, it will take several years of monitoring to identify patterns.

The long-term goal of standardizing our procedures is to have fewer cases of plagiarism occur. Our efforts convey, through faculty to students, the seriousness with which we take the issue. Again, evaluation design is challenged by the small number of cases and other contextual variables (number of students, educational background of students) that may change over time. Our intent is to continue to monitor the trends in plagiarism within the school by occasional review of case files and ongoing dialogue among faculty and with students.

Conclusion

Although each social work education program will have its unique traditions and culture into which the issue of student misconduct must fit, certain aspects of our work are generalizable to other programs. First, a multi-pronged approach is needed to address the various complex aspects of plagiarism. Second, involvement of a broad group of faculty and administrators is important in considering such value-laden issues. The ultimate policies must be acceptable to the faculty at large. Third, the case study was invaluable in forcing faculty and administrators to be specific about the consequences they would recommend. Until a case was developed, much general discussion took place that did not provide clarity. Finally, the link between being a professional social worker and performing ethically in graduate school may need to be made more explicit for students, either verbally or in writing or both. Regardless of our best efforts, unresolved issues remain. We encourage other social work programs to document their procedures and share them in a public forum so that the field can benefit from mutual wisdom concerning this challenging educational issue.

References


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