

Web site offers potential solution to plagiarism problems

Katie Beaver
Reporter

Faced with a growing trend of computer-assisted plagiarism, Elon officials are considering the installation of a new software program to detect plagiarism in student papers.

Equipped with instant Internet access and a paper topic, more and more students are giving in to the ever-present college-time crunch and copying phrases, paragraphs and even whole term papers directly from Web sites. Dr. Mary Wise, assistant vice president of academic affairs, has pledged to do something about the increasing use of the Internet for plagiarism.

"Like many other schools, Elon is facing a problem larger than any that we have faced in the past," Wise said. "The new technology available on the Internet makes it so easy to plagiarize that we have to ask ourselves how we are going to deal with the problem. All we know for sure right now is that we won't give up and say it doesn't matter."

Elon students are not alone in the use of plagiarism. According to a Psychological Record survey, 36 percent of undergraduate students have admitted to plagiarizing written material. With more than 200 "cheat sites" available on the Internet, plagiarizing is becoming

ing easier to accomplish and harder to catch.

A faculty member notified Wise of a computer database run through the Web site Turnitin.com. With access to this Web site, professors can check their students' work for all types

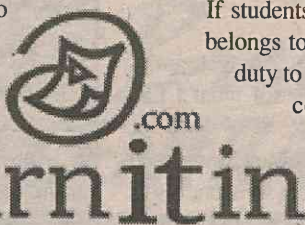
of plagiarism, including non-cited quotes or entire copied documents.

Wise says the programs work by scanning papers for similarities with more than 100,000 different Internet sites. If the program finds any overlapping information, it underlines what was taken from another document and cites the source.

Turnitin.com rates each paper on an overall similarity index, showing professors how much of the paper was taken from other sources. A paper with a few paragraphs taken from an online periodical could have a 40 percent similarity index, while a paper taken entirely from a term paper site could have a 100 percent similarity index.

"I have to ask myself a question each time I think about buying this program," Wise said. "Whose honor code is this?"

The Elon academic honor code, which says students are expected to refrain from plagiarism, could be interpreted in two different ways.



If students believe the honor code belongs to them and that it is their duty to refrain from plagiarism, a computer program like Turnitin.com would not be necessary, she said.

"But if these students see honesty on campus as

getting away with whatever they can, then we might want to have this program," Wise said. "It is a tough decision, because by getting this program it is like the faculty is saying we don't trust the students, and I don't know if that's the kind of thing we want."

Elon honor code violations have increased in the past few years, causing Wise and other faculty and staff members to reexamine Elon's approach to plagiarism, cheating and other violations. During the 1997-98 school year, eight honor code violations were filed. The next year, 26 violations were reported. Last year, 23 incident reports of honor code violations were filed, including 14 charges of plagiarism.

Wise said she believes that implementation of the program could double or triple the number of students caught plagiarizing.

"We have a lot of very honest students who sometimes get careless or just panic because they run out of time," Wise said. "Sometimes they don't even know they're cheating."

Biology professor Robert Vick has seen several examples of accidental plagiarism.

"When students work together in groups, professors sometimes forget to stipulate that it has to be an individual effort," Vick said. "I'll read one paper, then down further in the stack I'll get to one and it'll say the exact same thing. I start to wonder if the student turned it in twice, but then I realize that the two worked together in a group."

Although the program would cost between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per year, Wise said it could be a help to professors.

"To report a plagiarism violation, a professor has to find the source," Wise said. "I've seen professors spend five or six hours searching the Internet because they know the paper was plagiarized but they can't find the source. This will definitely help them save time and effort."

About 15,000 high schools and colleges employ Turnitin.com's services, including Duke University, The Citadel, Boston University and the University of California.

"Our responsibility is to help students never get into a position where they have to plagiarize," Wise said. "The faculty members hate to turn in students but we want to help students think for themselves and widen their minds."

Wise plans to hold several meetings with faculty and students throughout the year concerning the computer program.

Internet offers many full-text research papers for purchase

JT Bowen
Reporter

Someone famous once said, "True artists don't plagiarize; they steal." While appreciating the humor to this, there is also a serious truth behind it. The line of what exactly is and isn't plagiarism may seem a bit hazy, and it also may be interpreted differently by different people.

Let's picture this: It's late Sunday night. You have a five page paper due for your 8 a.m. class tomorrow, and you haven't even begun to research, let alone write it. All hope seems lost. Then, you remember a friend telling you about some Web site where you can simply call a number, tell them what you need a paper on, pay a "small" price and within a matter of minutes the paper will be e-mailed to your account.

Perhaps this is the point where the little angel and devil pop up on either side of your shoulder, the angel advising you not to buy the paper, that this would be violating the honor code. The little guy with the horns is mischievously laughing, telling you that it won't hurt just this once. Besides, you don't have to use the paper verbatim; you can just use it as a guide to what you want yours to resemble, and that's not bad, right? Indeed, this is a hotly debated topic, especially on the college scene. Before getting too deep into the ethical

side of it all, let's take a look at what some of these sites have to offer.

A site called "The Doctor" promises that each and every term paper is written by college professors employed at various colleges and universities around the country. It also guarantees that when you call to order your paper, you will get to speak to a college professor rather than a sales person. Hmm... sounds a little sketchy. The Web site goes on to give you the option of ordering stock reports or custom reports. Stock reports are papers that are already on file, but the site warns that the sources used may be "old and outdated." If you are in need of something specific, you can order a custom report. The college professors will take time to whip you up something that not only caters to your needs, but also uses "the latest books and articles" as reference materials.

Another site that seemed a little less shady is www.termpapers-on-file.com. This site offers papers on just about every subject imaginable, ranging from biology to mythology to psychology. It boasts that it has over 20,000 papers digitized, and the papers can be sent via e-mail or fax in just six hours. If you need it in a hurry, they can send it in three hours, for an additional charge. The company has people working around the clock, so you can always contact a real person.

All the papers offered by them are promised to be written by experienced researchers and writers. An extra plus is that they can not only send you the paper in English, but also Spanish, French, Italian, German and Portuguese.

Both of these sites have several similarities. First, they can both get very costly. Ten dollars per page for even a five-page paper is no cheap endeavor. Also, both sites clearly state that even if you're not pleased with the material presented in the paper you ordered, they will most definitely not give refunds. And finally, they both have disclaimers on them. Temppapers-on-line states, "It is both unethical and illegal to submit someone else's work as your own academic credit. Most students use our research as model examples. If you quote from our papers you must cite our paper as one of your sources."

So is it OK to empty your wallet and order one of these pre-made papers? It depends on your own personal ideals and ethics. Some may argue that it is wrong any way you look at it, and if one student has to put in hours of research and writing and editing, so should the next.

Others say that as long as you just use the paper as a guide and nothing else, it's perfectly ethical. In doing this, especially on papers that were procrastinated until the last minute, one must be

extremely careful, because what you think you are using strictly as "reference material" one minute, could end up being almost a carbon copy of your own paper.

On the extreme side, there are students who may decide to copy the paper verbatim and feel no regard whatsoever. One student, who wishes to remain anonymous, commented, "I haven't used one of these sites since I've been at college, but I did once in high school. Senioritis had definitely hit, and I was having too much fun with everything else to bother thinking about my senior research paper. Finally, it was the weekend before it was due, and I hadn't even opened a book. I realized I was screwed. I had to make the grade somehow, so I hit up one of the sites and found exactly what I was looking for. I didn't even bother making changes on it, I just slapped on my name and turned it in. I ended up getting a B+, but some of my friends in the class had worked their butts off and got Cs, so needless to say I felt pretty guilty. My teacher never suspected anything, but I know what I did was wrong."

Sophomore Dan McBride said, "I think plagiarism is OK in art and stuff because the best stuff comes from your life and the people around you, but when it comes to papers for school, plagiarizing is just plain laziness."