

Student letters offer insight into plagiarism violations

Jennifer Guarino
Managing Editor

Elon 101 advisors give freshmen letters written by Elon students who committed an honor code violation. These letters are poignant and effective in bringing the serious message of plagiarism to students. Two themes present themselves in honor code violations – students do not know how to properly cite sources or they plagiarize by cutting corners.

One student wrote in the letter to Elon 101 groups, "I cut corners in a class to try to save time and it caught up to me in the long run. I panicked and looked for an easy way out. I found an article on the Web that pertained to my paper selection. I figured as long as I documented it on my works cited page, I could copy it and hand it in... While I thought I was in the clear the whole time, it turned out to be a disaster a few days later."

Jessica Gisclair, assistant professor of communications, has reported students for honor code violations. "By reading a paper, most professors can determine if it is the student's thoughts and assessments," she said. Professors also use Web sites that search documents, books, journals and newspapers.

The student was asked to come to the Academic Affairs office after the professor suspected there was an honor code violation. "There was no talking out of this one," the student wrote. "I had never cheated in school before. I was scared all of my hard work was for nothing because I was going to get expelled. By telling the truth and admitting to cheating, I was given another chance to finish col-

lege. My honor and integrity was shattered. I apologized to my professor for what I had done."

The student failed the course and was placed on academic probation. "Using someone else's work as your own is immoral," the student wrote. "I learned the hard way."

Other students commit honor code violations because they do not know how to properly cite sources.

A student who transferred to Elon as a second semester freshman wrote in a letter to Elon 101 groups, "When I came here, I was handed a student handbook and told to read it. I saw what was written about the Honor Code... To tell the truth I did not read much farther than that. I knew what was involved in the Honor Code and did not read the details in the handbook... In my classes at Elon, I have never really been taught all the details on how to cite sources..."

"Many of our students don't know how to write. They don't understand writing style," Gisclair said, referring to APA, MLA and Chicago styles. "They don't understand how to prove their point. They have trouble supporting a premise." The student worked on a group paper, in which each member wrote a section. Each person created an error that was defined as plagiarism.

"I think the problem was lack of education," the student wrote. "None of us really knew how to properly cite a source and which parts needed to be cited. When I learned that we were accused of plagiarism, I was outraged."

The college writing curriculum provides instruction for writing research papers, but Gisclair says plagiarism is a nationwide trend. Students at the other schools she taught at previously had similar problems. "It doesn't fall on just the English department. It falls on every professor not teaching logical reasoning."

The student's letter was intended to teach others the costs of improper citation. "... Carefully read the student handbook, especially the part about the Honor Code," the student wrote. "Do not just skim over it like I did because you will miss some valuable information."

Gisclair said when students have a question about writing or the honor code; they should address their professor or go to the Writing Center. "Some people see the honor code as a punishment, she said. "The Honor Code is a guide. It shows the way to ethical behavior, a way to make decisions not a punishment."

Gisclair is concerned that students do not have the skills needed to be successful. "Writing is one of the foremost ways we learn to communicate," she said. "If we can't write, how can we expect to communicate?"

Mistakes should be ground for education, not punishment

John Kline
Guest Columnist



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Across the academic spectrum, there are few evils worse than plagiarism. It is a blatant show of disrespect toward colleagues, fellow students, experts, professors and everyone else connected with the academic world. Many people believe that even in cases of accidental plagiarism, such as a poor paraphrasing, no leniency should be shown.

As horrible an act as plagiarism is, it should never be condoned; however, there must be a line drawn somewhere. The purpose for the condemnation of plagiarism is to protect the intellectual property of the original authors, not to penalize those who may not know the rules concerning paraphrasing, were too tired to edit, or were too late to go to the Writing Center.

Is it not understandable that a student might forget to cite a quotation at 4 a.m. when they are typing? Picture it now, sitting at your computer with books and computer printouts all around, quoting the article in front of you and getting distracted for a moment. Sitting back down amidst hours-worth of thorough research and proceeding with the paper; the quote goes non-cited and unnoticed. For this slight mistake, an Elon student stands at risk of being suspended or even expelled. I am sorry, but this does not seem right.

I believe it should be the goal of this institution to motivate students to work to their maximum potential. Yet we have policies that, with one simple editing mistake, could not only demoralize a student, but destroy his academic career as well. How does Elon plan to have their precious leaders emerge into the world when they are taught that the slightest mistake causes total, almost unfathomable failure? Are we trying to create people who believe that the slightest mistake is damning, that nothing should be or can be forgiven? I assure you this is not the case. However, rigid policies such as these do

nothing to deter those who would willingly commit such vile acts, and they are more effective in destroying the motivation of those victims of accidents.

A single error and off you go, whisked away to the dungeon to await your tribunal before the dreaded Honor

Council. And you stand before them, your stomach in knots, yours palms sweating uncontrollably, and your entire future is hanging in the balance, just waiting for the axe to drop. Even if you are one of the few found innocent of these charges, the damage has been done. The accusation of plagiarism and the record of trial will stand forever.

The honor code Elon students are bound by, whether signed on every paper we turn in or not, states that we swear that we did not lie, cheat or steal. If a mistake is found that the student was unaware of, then is a professor's job to send him before the firing squad or to explain to him what is wrong?

Prohibiting plagiarism is done to protect the intellectual property of the innocent, not to weed out the guilty. Therefore, the penalties for plagiarism, I feel, are blown well out of proportion. Rather than threaten students with expulsion, would it not be wiser to teach them what they did wrong, why it is wrong and how to avoid it? If someone downloads a paper from the Internet, or copies something word for word from a book or other resource, then they should be punished. But circumstances unknown to most are generally at hand when events like these occur. I say, do not immediately threaten the end of their academic career, but rather take the opportunity to change their ways. The goal of professors should be to help those minds develop not tear them down for simple mistakes. Do not threaten students' academic career for a lack of revision, but rather give them the necessary guidance to fully develop.

Editor's Note:



A couple weeks ago the issue of plagiarism was vividly brought to my attention. I was informed that one of the articles I had printed in my section was plagiarized word for word. I decided to take this opportunity to educate and enlighten others about this issue, which is important to us all.

- Katie Bonebrake

Next Week's Focus Topic:

North vs. South

If you are interested in writing an article or have any suggestions for future topics call x7247 or e-mail Katie.Bonebrake@elon.edu