

Site catches cheaters, controversy

BY CLINT JOHNSON
STAFF WRITER

If you're a UNC student, you are probably a cheater.

At least that's the conclusion of a study done by the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University. It found that on most campuses 70 percent of students admitted to cheating in some form.

To combat academic dishonesty many institutions are subscribing to an online service called TurnItIn, but controversy concerning students' intellectual property rights has turned some away.

Creator John Barrie said TurnItIn, founded in 1998, is a "technology used in the digital assessment of student work." It

consists of three primary functions: It checks for originality of written assignments, facilitates peer review and allows instructors to digitally assess students' work.

Instructors submit essays to TurnItIn, where assignments are compared against other essays, billions of Internet pages and databases of journal articles and periodicals.

Instructors then receive an originality report, which indicates the percentage of plagiarized material in the paper.

TurnItIn boasts contracts with about 7,000 institutions in more than 90 countries. About 80,000 papers are added to the database every day, he said.

"TurnItIn has become a part of

how education works," Barrie said.

Teacher Amanda Harder, who uses TurnItIn in her Honors English classes at East Chapel Hill High School, said she thinks it greatly reduces the chance of plagiarism.

"It gives me an extra level of security," she said.

Critics have said the service violates students' intellectual property rights, which protect a creator's work — including class essays — and prevent others from profiting off it.

But to be effective as a plagiarism deterrent, teachers must submit students' papers to TurnItIn, often without a student's consent.

"There is no controversy," Barrie said. "There is a misunderstanding of how TurnItIn works." The service

is legal under the U.S. Copyright Act, he said, and if there were a legal problem, reputable universities would not be using it.

Though some UNC professors pay for the service out of pocket, the University does not subscribe to it.

"With the controversy surrounding TurnItIn, it's not a good investment for UNC right now," said Candace Debnam, undergraduate student attorney general.

Barrie said studies have shown that institutions that have used the service for five or more years have seen dramatic drops in plagiarism rates.

Some students disagreed regarding its effectiveness.

"I'm not convinced that their

methods produce accurate results," said junior Gareth Mitchell, who had a teacher who used TurnItIn.

He said the originality report does not necessarily indicate whether someone borrowed another person's ideas; they could have merely rephrased them.

"There's a big gray area," he said. "Unless someone blatantly cheats, it can't be black or white."

Debnam said the responsibility ultimately lies with students.

"Professors can put up every stopgap in the world, but if a student wants to plagiarize, they'll find a way."


Contact the Features Editor at features@unc.edu.

Other universities who use TurnItIn:

- > Georgetown University
- > Miami Dade College
- > University of Maryland University College
- > United States Military Academy-West Point
- > University of Florida
- > Lehigh University
- > Rutgers University
- > Auburn University
- > Hofstra University
- > California State University System
- > Tulane University
- > University of California-Los Angeles
- > University of California-Irvine

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