Eye on Campus

Cracking down on Plagiarism - Fighting Fire with Fire

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A new Plagiarism detection software program Turnitin (Turn-it-in) has been installed into Penn State University. The Turnitin program serves many different functions.

Turnitin detects plagiarism among papers turned in by comparing student's paper to internet sites, books, and journals, which translates to over 4,600,000,000 pieces of paper being checked. It then relays multiple pieces of information to the teacher.

Turnitin highlights passages in the paper and similar passages in articles, giving a side-to-side view of both documents and a percentage of the degree of plagiarism.

The ultimate decision of whether it is plagiarism or not is made by the teacher. The Turnitin program allows teachers to calculate and keep track of grades in a more organized fashion. Teachers may also correct and comment on papers without damaging the hard copy and the program can create a portfolio of student's work. The program allows students to collaborate and rate papers according to criteria set by the instructor.

Turnitin program was originally created in 1996 at UC Berkeley and in two short years, it reached international levels. The program is now instituted in over eighty countries and licensed to over 2,500 schools. At its peak, the program collects and inserts close to 20,000 papers into its database per day and serves over seven million students. This information and much more can be found easily at www.turnitin.com

Although, only seven cases of plagiarism were recorded at the Delaware County campus last semester. University wide "plagiarism is happening enough to take steps to prevent it" said Sarah Whilden, the head librarian and a member of the Academic Integrity Commission here at Delco.

How will this program affect the Penn State students here at Delaware County? Most students will not be affected by this "prevention and detection tool" said Wilden. The use of the Turnitin program is completely optional. This means that the use of the Turnitin program is at the discretion of any given teacher. Students are allowed to put their own papers into the program to check for plagiarism, which allows the student to make any changes before turning the paper in and not risk handing in an unintentional partly-plagiarized paper.

What happens if this program catches a student plagiarizing and the teacher agrees?

The first step is the faculty member will approach the student and it can be resolved in either one of three ways. The student takes a penalty on the project in some manner, or the student agrees to violating the academic integrity agreement, but deems the punishment unfair, or denies the accusation altogether. In the last two instances, the case is then presented and reviewed by Academic Integrity Commission. If found guilty, it is possible to fail the course and receive an academic sanction printed on his/her transcript which relays to other schools and possible jobs that this student has conducted an ethical breech of conduct.

Some advice by Whilden, "Students should not get into desperate situations that they need to cheat. Start early and get help."

You can get help at the plagiarism workshop which will place on September 21, 2005.

"Plagiarism is a problem, but it is no worse here at Delco than at other universities. Maybe even less" said Pamela Main, who is an English professor on campus.

Also, Main will be running the plagerism workshop, and works in the Writing Center in the Main building.

The plagiarism workshop is an event to help prevent and solve the spread of plagiarism. The workshop is meant to be interactive with two on-campus tutors leading a discussion, followed by a question and answer session. Some writing may be involved, but "It's nothing to be afraid of," said Main.

Students can get more information about Turnitin at this workshop. Although, the new Turnitin program will not be the main focus of this workshop, it will be mentioned.

The focus will be more directed at the importance of not plagiarizing and methods of preventing plagiarism.

Quotes and Comments about plagiarism at PSU

"Plagiarism is a problem, but it is no worse here at Delco than at other universities. Maybe even less"
- Prof. Pamela Main,

"Students should not get into desperate situations that they need to cheat."
- Sarah Whilden, head librarian.

"Most of them deny plagiarizing, even though I have evidence. One problem is that students don't know what counts as plagiarism."
- Prof. Laura Guertin

Giving credit where credit is due: Plagiarism at Delco

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So let's say it's the end of the semester.

You're doing pretty well in all of your classes and all you have left are a couple of final exams and one big research project. The project's deadline grows ever closer, and you're having trouble finishing out the last couple of pages.

Then you stumble across a most intelligent-sounding passage in one of your reference books, and decide that it'd be a perfect fit in your paper. The only problem is, the words are not your own. Well, perhaps the teacher won't find out. You type the passage in word for word, and then finish the paper without quoting the passage's true author.

Everything is peachy keen, right? NO!

Plagiarism is the bane of high schools and colleges all over the country. It can be simply described as not giving credit where credit is due. Omission of quotations or citations are considered plagiarism, as is the use of other's words without giving credit. Even division of an assignment among classmates is considered plagiarism.

So if we know what plagiarism is and have a general idea as to how it can be avoided (see dianahacker.com for more information on plagiarism), why do students continue to commit this offense against academic integrity?

Upon being questioned about plagiarism experiences in high school, a sophomore Psychology major here at Delco admitted to plagiarizing on a history paper.

Wishing to remain anonymous, she offered this reason.

"I knew my teacher was slow and wouldn't catch on, so I did it," she said.

Well, the teacher caught on this time, and the student's punishment was a redo of the paper. This is a very lenient punishment in considering if her case was brought before the Academic Integrity Committee, she risked a grade of an "XF" for the class.

An "XF" grade goes on a student's permanent record signifying that the student broke the university's academic integrity policy (University Senate Policy 49-20).

When questioned about previous plagiarism experiences, another student's reason was that the assignment was just too long, so the work was split up among 3 students who combined their information into a single product.

Dr. Arnold Markley is a professor of English here at Delco. He says that plagiarism doesn't occur often in his classes.

"I try to design assignments based on individual thought," he said, "So that students are forced to come up with their own wordings."

When asked what reasons students used to justify plagiarism, he said, "They didn't realize they were doing it, or they were under pressure to complete the assignment by a certain time."

Dr. Laura Guertin, popularly known as "Dr. G" among her students, states that she always has one obvious violation of academic integrity per semester.

"Most of them deny plagiarizing, even though I have evidence," she said. "One problem is that students don't know what counts as plagiarism."

Let's return to the hypothetical situation at the beginning of this article for a second.

Say you come up with your own intelligent-sounding passage. It adds a nice touch to your paper, so you include the passage and turn your paper in. The teacher asks to speak with you and informs you that that wonderful passage you wrote was plagiarized.

It turns out those same words were written by some famous historian 20 years ago. How can this be prevented? The answer lies in a new program called Turnitin, to which Penn State has recently subscribed.

The program allows both students and teachers to check the student's work against a vast database of articles, books, and even papers by other students. Justin Kopicki, a freshman, attended Lower Merion High School where the Turnitin service was employed.

"I think it will be a good way to stop plagiarism. It is annoying because it's just another thing that students have to check, but it is effective nonetheless. I think about three of my papers are already up there on it [Turnitin]," he said.

Students and teachers agree that Turnitin will serve as a good barrier against plagiarism, but only if the students use it to their advantage, by checking their work with the program before submitting the final product.