

## More Trouble Than it is Worth? Detecting and Prosecuting Plagiarism in Business Plans<sup>†</sup>

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### Abstract

*The author of this paper is presently prosecuting more plagiarism cases than any other faculty member at an institution with approximately 800 full-time faculty and 23,000 students. During the spring 2007 semester (the most recent as of this writing), twenty instances of plagiarism were detected, ranging from 15 “blatant” and extensive cases to 5 that were less severe. These cases from the most recent semester are in addition to 19 cases that have already been documented during the past two and one-half years of the author’s employment in a tenure-track appointment at the institution where he is employed. All 39 cases to date involve entrepreneurship students who were engaged in creating their own individually assigned business plans. The assignment is considered to be a major course component from the point of view of departmental faculty who administer and teach several sections of the course, which is a component of entrepreneurship major and minor programs. This paper discusses challenges for students as well as faculty who may face the issue of plagiarism in an entrepreneurship course (with implications for teaching and learning in other courses).*

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<sup>†</sup> This paper is a continuation of earlier research from the author: *Plagiarism and business plans: A growing challenge for entrepreneurship education?* Manuscript accepted for journal publication by the Academy of Entrepreneurship Education. New data and analysis have been added to that which was reported earlier, in order to discuss longitudinal findings.

## **Introduction**

From this author's point of view, one of the most emotionally difficult aspects of prosecuting plagiarism is that the values exhibited by those who are found guilty are profoundly different from, and a direct affront to this author's own values. There are really only three main reasons that plagiarism may occur: 1) cheating is a pervasive ethical problem of pandemic proportions (justification for this dire assessment is discussed in-depth below); 2) students lack essential competencies and are not able to render an adequate academic performance; or 3) this reason is a combination of the two above -- many students who are caught and admit an ethical breach offer their own lack of skill as their reason for resorting to plagiarism (but none have sought help, either).

Every case with which this author has been associated and is reporting in this paper has undergone a multi-step procedure to ensure students are afforded due process. An "Office of Judicial affairs," which operates at the university level, creates and administers academic integrity policies and provides a system which allows for the independent evaluation of evidence and formal hearings as well as an appeals process. At least insofar as academic integrity policies at the institution that employs this author are concerned, students are expected to understand what constitutes plagiarism, and that it is not acceptable. Further, faculty are expected to uphold these policies as is clearly stated by the University's Office of Judicial Affairs ("Frequently Asked," 2007):

### **Am I required to report all cases of academic misconduct that I encounter?**

Yes. See the answer to the following question for details on why.

### **Why can't I just do what I want to the student and not go through the judicial process?**

- a. It is against University policy. The instructor should report allegations of academic misconduct to the head of the concerned department and to the assistant dean for Judicial Affairs.

There are also consequences for faculty members who may find themselves in the midst of plagiarists and the acts that they commit. These consequences include stress, and possibly placing one's academic career or personal safety in peril (discussed below).

## **Prevention Attempts**

Despite institutional expectations, and to preemptively address those who may assume the author of this paper is too aggressive in the prosecution of cases (notwithstanding the aforementioned requirement to do so), students who may claim to be naïve are presented with several forms of explicit communication that describe plagiarism, indicate it is completely unacceptable, warn that it will probably be detected, and specify the consequences. One of the primary reasons for this paper is to address this communication in terms of its content, delivery, intent, evolution, and suggestions for use

by other classroom instructors. The following list has been identified by the Office of Judicial Affairs as the most extensive inventories of existing tools, techniques and instruments among professors on the author's campus:

- a) A written Amnesty Procedure (an attempt to wrestle with the author's own conscience relative to notions of justice), developed independently, but with feedback from the Office of Judicial Affairs.
- b) A Grading Rubric (distributed on the first day of class in any given teaching term, and continuously available online), which explains what is meant by plagiarism in "clear as a bell" language (quoting reviewer feedback from several sources).
- c) Notices and links on my faculty site (to the Office of Judicial Affairs and its literature), especially at the top of the Entrepreneurship course page.
- d) A two page contract with numerous terms and conditions listed (at the end of my syllabus and signified as accepted by students' initials); among these terms and conditions is one particular passage that explicitly acknowledges the importance and force of the Grading Rubric and its references to plagiarism as an act that is strictly prohibited.
- e) A "Notice of Allegation of Academic Integrity Violation" form.
- f) This semester, the classes were even led in a chant conducted in a sing-song fashion to the effect that the instructor would be looking for plagiarism, tools and software would be used, graduate assistants were trained to do the same; if students cheated, they would probably be caught (and the penalty would be failure).
- g) The aforementioned plagiarism paper (in press), which has been used in discussions, is not a "secret" withheld from students.
- h) Statements about this author's own values, which are derived from parents and upbringing. When explaining how this author views cheating, responsibility and honor, I relate these to experiences as the child of distinguished Air Force pilot, Boy Scout, et cetera, to make the point: "I don't care that 'everybody's doing it' – if you cheat my classroom, I will turn you in, and I will fail you."
- i) Several verbal warnings are delivered throughout the semester.

Meanwhile, the most common excuse offered by students, "I did not know that what I was doing was wrong," is considered a weak argument on the part of students who may be involved in defending themselves in a plagiarism case.

### **Plagiarism in Business Plans: Blatant and Less Severe**

Earlier research by this author tracked plagiarism cases across three semesters, during which 18 cases were reported among 176 students who had submitted business plans during the period under observation (slightly over 10 percent). This present paper serves to update the previously reported data by adding an additional academic year (fall 2006 to spring 2007) to the observation period, during which 104 additional plans were submitted by students in five course sections, and 21 additional cases of plagiarism were observed. It is interesting to note that the total number of plagiarism cases during the most recent semester, spring 2007, is greater than the number of cases observed during the previous

four semesters combined (i.e., 19 cases were observed during the previous four semesters prior to the spring 2007 semester, during which 20 cases were observed).

As this research is evolving, along with the learning and experience of this researcher, it should also be noted that some changes are occurring in research methodology as well as instructional methods, and more changes are in store. As a result of an evolving relationship with the institution's Office of Judicial Affairs, a mutual interest has developed in several areas, including prevention as a first course of action, followed by detection and prosecution of blatant and extensive cases, and the tracking of all other cases, even when a decision is made to forego prosecution. (In addition, this author has created an "Amnesty Program," which has been pilot tested with disappointing results, to date.)

Relative to research methodology, during the spring 2007 semester, this author began to track and report every single case, even those that were characterized as minor. Of the 20 total cases reported during the spring semester, it was agreed that 5 would be characterized as minor, labeled as "technical violations" (in keeping with a grading rubric created by the author and distributed to students early in the semester) and they were not prosecuted. The remaining 15 cases have been characterized as severe and as such worthy of prosecution.

So what is "minor," as it was agreed to be defined with respect to these cases? First, it should be made clear that even these so-called minor violations could have been successfully prosecuted, as per the Office of Judicial Affairs under a strict interpretation of university academic integrity policies. Typically, while these students did indeed violate the "letter of the law" with respect to these policies, they did so while they were concurrently making a systematic attempt to legitimately pursue their business plan writing assignments. For instance, if page after page of legitimate text reflecting what was apparently a competent and honest effort to properly complete the assignment was found, and in the midst of that text there was a sentence that was improperly taken, these instances were tracked, but no notice was served, and no prosecution occurred.

For readers of this paper, the above description of a minor offense may sound like one that should also be prosecuted, or give rise to the question, what is "blatant" or severe? Discerning what is minor from what is severe gives rise to future research questions, and may certainly be worthy of debate. The answer depends on one's own sense of values as well as formal definitions expressed through stated policies, administered at the classroom level or higher up, at the school, college, or institutional level. As for a working definition, as it has been administered in this present situation, blatant (severe, et al) has been interpreted to mean a systematic effort or evidence thereof as seen through the use of multiple sentences and paragraphs taken from one or more sources. Typically these sources are either existing business plans or found on the Internet.

The aforementioned grading rubric defines minor technical violations as well as more severe cases further, for the benefit of students. The following text is taken from that grading rubric, and has been reviewed (and characterized as "clear as a bell") by

independent reviewers including Judicial Affairs, colleagues at the author's own and other universities, and blind reviewers who have evaluated the rubric as worthy of publication in a journal article (Lahm, 2007):

*Technical Violation of Plagiarism Rules, e.g., improper quotation of sources and other infractions apparently associated with a lack of skill on the part of the author.*

*Absolute Violation of Plagiarism Rules--Paraphrasing of an existing plan (e.g., rewriting a sample plan, sentences, paragraphs, or passages therein; this includes financial information, tables, charts, etc.); collaboration/sharing of documents, text, phrases, passages, or entire plans (used verbatim or modified); usage of entire sentences, paragraphs, data, facts, plans or other materials without acknowledgement of sources, and submitted as though the work was the student's own work rather than that of the original author. Other violations of Academic Integrity Policies not described here.*

*Evidence of an absolute violation of plagiarism rules shall result in the work in question being referred to the appropriate officials for further action and the issuance of a grade of "F" for the course (as stated in the course syllabus).*

Table 1, below, provides data representing successfully prosecuted cases from spring 2005 to fall 2006 without tracking degrees of severity (i.e., those characterized as minor). As explained in the discussion above, as of the spring 2007 semester, total observed cases have begun to be reported, whether they are deemed to be severe or minor (and are prosecuted, or not, respectively):

Table 1  
Confirmed Plagiarism Cases

Class Size	Total Cases	Severe	Minor	Term	Time	Days
25	9	7	2	Spring 2007	12:40-2:05	M-W
24	6	5	1	Spring 2007	2:20-3:45	M-W
17	5	3	2	Spring 2007	4:30-7:30	M
66	20	15	5			
Percent	30%					

Class Size	Cases	Term	Time	Days
23	1	Fall 2006	2:20-3:45	M-W
15	0	Fall 2006	4:30-7:30	M
38	1			
Percent	3%			

Class Size	Cases	Term	Time	Days
29	4	Spring 2006	12:40-2:05	M-W
26	1	Spring 2006	2:20-3:45	M-W
26	5	Spring 2006	4:30-7:30	M
81	10			

Percent	12%				
17	1	Fall	2005	6:00-9:00	W
17	1				
Percent	6%				
31	3	Spring	2005	9:40-11:05	T-Th
27	0	Spring	2005	11:20-12:45	T-Th
20	4	Spring	2005	4:30-7:30	T
78	7				
Percent	9%				

Data reflect course records with respect to submitted business plans (as compared to total enrollments, which were higher) and findings from Judicial Affairs wherein students were determined to be “responsible.”

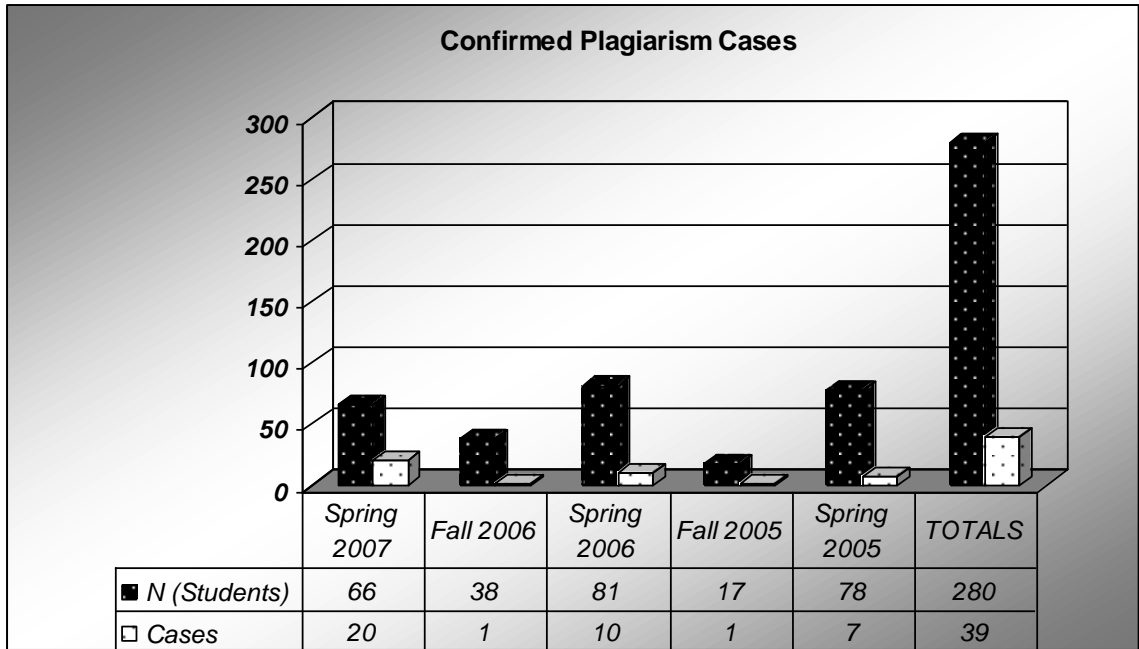
As indicated in Table 2, below, almost 14 percent, that is, 39 of the total number of students (280) from whom business plans were collected over a five semester period were found to be responsible for plagiarism.

Table 2  
Total Cases During Observation Period

Term	N (Students)	Cases	Sections
Spring 2007	66	20	3
Fall 2006	38	1	2
Spring 2006	81	10	3
Fall 2005	17	1	1
Spring 2005	78	7	3
TOTALS	280	39	
		Percent 14%	0.139285714

Cumulative data reporting number of students, semesters, sections, and cases from course records and findings from Judicial Affairs wherein students were determined to be “responsible.”

Figure 1, below, illustrates the distribution of confirmed business plan plagiarism cases during the five semesters under observation.



### **More Trouble Than it is Worth?**

Even when one is doing his or her duty in identifying and prosecuting plagiarists, many students exhibit emotional outbursts upon being presented by evidence, and subsequently argue that the consequences they will suffer (which students tend to blame on the faculty member rather than themselves) will exact damage upon them that is unjustified. However, as most managers and administrators (and parents) know, if one sets a policy, then fails to adhere to the policy relative to enforcement, then the policy becomes irrelevant, and cannot be effective.

Hence, in order to be effective, or to even have a chance of being effective, faculty members who intend to enforce (or are compelled to enforce) plagiarism and cheating policies must steadfastly maintain a position that students may view as overly harsh, and unjustified. Namely, that position must be that “once a student is found guilty (especially after being warned, again and again), then he/she will [specify whatever consequence is to be used here].” Exacerbating the issue is the fact that students’ values have shifted, and from their point of view, just like driving a few miles over the speed limit, cheating is something that “everybody’s doing” (Kleiner & Lord, 1999). Significant consequences such as course failure (the penalty imposed by this author) or expulsion (a consequence imposed by the institution, but typically only among repeat offenders), therefore, from the point of view of individuals who consider cheating to be a minor offense, probably do seem unfair.

Thus, besides having to endure the time consuming process of detecting, documenting, and prosecuting cases, one must also endure stressful interactions with individual students who are more angry with you as the faculty member who “did this to them” than they are with themselves (except for having been caught). This is because you, the

faculty member, are perceived as being “hard-nosed” and impeding the respective student’s progress toward whatever career or academic destination he or she had in mind. This logic places the student in a state-of-mind such that he or she is the victim, and you, the faculty member, are the perpetrator of wrongdoing upon them.

Students will also lie in attempts to support their case against allegations of plagiarism, and in the face of hard evidence, they compound the problems that they have created for themselves. Several cases have involved students who blame friends or classmates as their excuse, and since the business plan is strictly an individual assignment, the argument places the student’s case in jeopardy from yet another direction. In other words, “they hang themselves,” and possibly a friend or classmate at the same time. This, too, is disheartening.

Finally, colleagues and administrators may have doubts about the faculty member’s teaching ability and other aspects of the faculty member’s performance rather than placing the blame (where it belongs – this author would assert) on the persons who committed plagiarism. At many institutions, especially those that confuse student-centeredness and satisfaction with ethically delivered services delivered by professionals, ratings may be an issue for the faculty member. Student ratings are the only indices of teaching performance that have been mentioned as being relevant in appointment and renewal letters given to this author, so it is apparent that these ratings are the means by which performance, or the lack thereof, is determined. Therefore, popularity is an overwhelming concern, given that failing grades or other consequences imposed upon individual students (or their cohorts) obviously could have a severe negative affect on students’ reported levels of happiness.

## References

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