

ARE WE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR PLAGIARISM IN BUSINESS PLANS?

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Submitted to:

Allied Academies – Proceedings

Academy of Entrepreneurship (AE)

Fall 2006 Conference, Reno, NV

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ABSTRACT

Myriad instances of cheating, ethical breaches, plagiarism, and dishonesty in education, publishing, entertainment, and other venues have been widely publicized in the mass media. A 22-year-old Wal-Mart heiress has been accused of buying most of her college assignments, custom-made on her behalf – compliments of the services provided by her former roommate. Term paper mills offering either off-the-shelf or individualized products have blossomed. Names on the Internet where students congregate to shop for these services, such as Cheater.com and SchoolSucks.com, are indicative unto themselves of the lack of respect that these service providers, and the students who use them, show toward values associated with honesty or integrity. Most research on the subject of academic integrity and cheating has concentrated on student tendencies as a whole, or certain disciplines, including business students within various major, who do tend to be more inclined to commit acts of academic dishonesty. Despite the above described landscape, research on business plans and plagiarism (cheating, et al), is either limited or has not been aggressively pursued by entrepreneurship scholars, to date. This paper provides an overview of plagiarism and cheating issues as a prelude to future research and discourse among entrepreneurship teachers and researchers.

PLAGIARISM: JUST HOW BAD IS IT?

As a Harvard undergraduate student sat across from her in an interview on the *Today* show, a “skeptical” Katie Couric asked probing questions about the plagiarism allegations that had been lodged against the student (Finkelstein, 2006). According to *Publishers Weekly* and other sources, the student had reportedly received a \$500,000 advance for her book deal (while she was still in high school) from publisher Little, Brown & Company (Deahl & Milliot, 2006; Finkelstein, 2006). Meanwhile, the publisher of books from which the student was alleged to have plagiarized, Crown Publishing Group, identified over 40 instances where text passages bore questionable similarities (Finkelstein, 2006).

NBC recently severed its ties with a freelance “producer who plagiarized passages from” the popular television series, ‘The West Wing’ (Freelance Producer, 2006). The discovery of this instance was the result of an audience member’s email, which alerted the network to the plagiarized material. ABC News Primetime aired an investigative report suggesting “A *Cheating Crisis in America's Schools*” (A Cheating Crisis, 2006). After Wal-Mart heiress Paige Laurie was accused by her former college roommate of buying custom papers and other work (while they both attended the University of Southern California; the roommate’s story was originally aired on ABC News’ *20/20*), The University of Missouri removed the 22-year-old’s name from its new sports arena; Laurie’s parents’ donation provided the funding for that arena to be built (Isaacson, 2004).

Nitterhouse (2003) cited a series of previous studies which indicated several professional disciplines have reported plagiarism problems, including marketing, computer science, journalism, nursing, and science (p. 215). In the June 2006 issue of the Association for Computing Machinery’s journal, *Communications of the ACM*, published a plagiarism policy statement based (in part) on the following rationale (Boisvert & Irwin, 2006):

Incidents of plagiarism are escalating in computer science and engineering. While plagiarism cases were very rare during ACM's first 40 years in the publishing business, several cases have been uncovered annually in recent years. Most of these cases have been extreme, blatant violations of ethical practice. ACM has dealt with papers published in conference proceedings in which very little change was made in the copyrighted plagiarized article except for a new list of authors. We've seen other cases in which two articles differed completely in their wording, but placed side-by-side we discovered that corresponding sentences said exactly the same thing throughout the two articles.

In every context, be it among professions, on the Internet, in music and entertainment, and in academic writing -- on the part of students *and professors* -- (Bartlett & Smallwood, 2004), plagiarism and other forms of dishonesty have been observed to be on the rise by researchers.

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE ON PLAGIARISM AND BUSINESS PLANS

After conducting searches using the *ProQuest* database (set to return full text documents from scholarly journals), the author of this paper found that existing research, specifically as it pertains to plagiarism and business plans is lacking in the literature. Search term combinations (with the Boolean "and") included "entrepreneurship" and "plagiarism"; "business plan" and "plagiarism"; and "business plan" and "cheating" were all returned with zero results. Similar searches using the *Eric* database were also conducted, again with zero results. *Google* search efforts on the terms "business plan" and "plagiarism," returned (top page ranked) hits that were typically linked to entrepreneurship courses, and their corresponding syllabi and plagiarism policy statements. (Author's note: It is recognized that *Google* is not considered to be a reliable scholarly research tool.)

Widening the search to the topic of plagiarism more generally showed a clear consensus among researchers that plagiarism and cheating are rampant in the public sector as well as in the academic community at large (Chapman, Davis, Toy, & Wright, 2004; Crown & Spiller, 1998; Kleiner & Lord, 1999; Nitterhouse, 2003; Ogilby, 1995). A cover story article in *U.S. News and World Report* declared: "Academic fraud has never been easier. Students can tamper electronically with grade records, transmit quiz answers via pager or cell phone, and lift term papers from hundreds of Web sites" (Kleiner & Lord, 1999). Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity (CIA) has sponsored longitudinal research through an ongoing project which has surveyed approximately 50,000 students on "more than 60 campuses" (McCabe, 2005). Its most recent results, based on findings released in June 2005, indicated that "on most campuses, 70% of students admit to some cheating"; 40% admitted to Internet plagiarism; and (disturbing as it may be to the author of this paper on this particular topic) 44% of faculty "who were aware of student cheating in their course in the last three years, have never reported a student for cheating to the appropriate campus authority" (McCabe, 2005).

While the above described review does not exhaust every possible means of accessing existing research that is specific to plagiarism and business plans, the lack of returned search results clearly indicate that this present paper concerns an area which deserves additional attention on the part of entrepreneurship scholars. Further it is acknowledged that plagiarism at large is not necessarily generalizable to business plans. However, if one is willing to question the likelihood that a pervasive phenomenon in education and every facet of society at large either has already or will impact entrepreneurship education, the author of this paper would suggest that a serious research effort is deserved.

PLAGIARISM CASES AND BUSINESS PLANS AS AN IMPETUS FOR THIS PAPER

While the above overview is meant to provide a broader introduction to the enormity of the plagiarism problem at large, this paper's primary focus is plagiarism (a form of cheating commonly identified in academic integrity policy statements) as it pertains to business plans. As an assignment, one might suggest that business plans are not extremely dissimilar when they are compared to term papers, or that business plans can be even more difficult. In either instance, business plans are generally viewed by students as well as members of the practitioner community to be challenging assignments, especially if they are approached with dedication and subjected to rigorous review (such as in business plan competitions, or when they are used to attract funding).

During the three semesters immediately preceding the development of this paper, its author observed apparent problems with plagiarism while delivering an entrepreneurship course at a public AACSB accredited university (which enrolls approximately 22,000 students). Although additional instances of suspected inappropriate behavior (academic dishonesty) were deemed to be uncertain based on an inability to obtain sufficient written evidence to document suspected plagiarists' sources -- and were therefore not submitted for review by the institution's Judicial Affairs office -- students were found to be responsible in a total of 18 successfully prosecuted plagiarism cases. In other words, there may have been more acts of plagiarism, but, cases that were not supported with sufficient evidence to suggest with near certainty that subsequent proceedings would result in a finding of "responsible" were not pursued (Frequently Asked, 2005).

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Perhaps one of the biggest questions one might ask is: how can cheating and plagiarism be mitigated or stopped (von Dran, Callahan, & Taylor, 2001)? It is generally assumed that individuals who are capable of cheating while they are in school, would be willing to commit additional ethical breaches once they have entered the business world (Crane, 2004; Lawson, 2004; Ogilby, 1995). There are some disappointing findings within the literature (primarily business ethics related research), which suggest that changing ethical behavior of values may be difficult (Kidwell, Wozniak, & Laurel, 2003).

Individual faculty who are determined to curtail plagiarism need to clearly express -- preferably during their opening remarks at the beginning of a course -- that they intend to detect and prosecute plagiarism). Academic integrity policies should also be distributed in written form: course syllabi, a faculty Website, and institutional brochures, statements, and the like (if available) are effective communication vehicles. Faculty should also make clear what the consequences will be: typically, course failure and/or at least no credit for the assignment are stated consequences (based on a review of syllabi and Websites from other faculty, as discussed above). In addition, to curtail the notion in advance that consequences are negotiable based on their impact on an individual student's academic career, this author delivers a statement along these lines: "The burden will be placed on the student to recognize that embarrassment, having to inform parents, loss of scholarships, or any other applicable consequences will not be considered relevant." It is also made clear that the only thing that matters is the official determination by the institution's Judicial Affairs authorities: "responsible" or "not responsible" (Frequently Asked, 2005; Judicial Affairs, 2005).

It should be made clear that even though some students may get away, a significant proportion of students who do cheat can and will be caught (and in the case of this author, summary statistics including the number of students who have been caught are discussed). Some of the literature reviewed while developing this paper showed that instances of plagiarism are sometimes detected after the fact (Bailey, 2006; Bartlett & Smallwood, 2004; Lesko, 2004), perhaps even years later.

CONCLUSION

Evidence suggests a disintegration of ethical and performance standards in both the practical and academic business communities. Research, as it pertains specifically to business plans and plagiarism (cheating, et al), is either limited or has not been aggressively pursued by entrepreneurship scholars, to date. However, logical inference strongly infers that if indeed “‘Everyone’s doing it [cheating],’ from grade school to graduate school” (Kleiner & Lord, 1999); students in business related courses tend to cheat more (Chapman, Davis, Toy, & Wright, 2004); paper mills have blossomed (Groark, Oblinger, & Choa, 2001); and there is an there is “A Cheating Crisis in America’s Schools,” (A Cheating Crisis, 2006), then entrepreneurship educators should be on the lookout for plagiarism in business plans.

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