

PLAGIARISM AND BUSINESS PLANS: A GROWING CHALLENGE FOR
ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION?

Robert J. Lahm, Jr.
Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship
Jones College of Business
Middle Tennessee State University
P.O. Box 40
Murfreesboro, TN 37132
Phone: (615) 898-2785
Fax: (615) 898-5438
E-mail: rlahm@mtsu.edu
<http://mtsu.edu/~rlahm>

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship students in numerous academic programs face a unique and arguably difficult assignment: that of creating a business plan. Unfortunately, some students purposely cheat, and others lack sufficient competencies in research and writing, such that they violate academic integrity policies. While plagiarism has been a hot topic in recent media coverage, and in education at large, there is scant research in existence to date that addresses plagiarism specifically as it relates to business plans and entrepreneurship courses. Numerous researchers have observed an overall increase in various forms of academic dishonesty as well as shifting attitudes among students. This paper discusses business plan plagiarism cases and methods by which they were detected and prosecuted through the Judicial Affairs offices at one institution. The author also provides a possible impetus and suggestions for future research as it pertains to a growing challenge for the academic (and practical community).

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).

The creator of the site, PlagiarismToday.com, related his reason for becoming involved in an aggressive effort to track down and eliminate (primarily) Internet-based plagiarism by declaring: “I never wanted to be a plagiarism fighter, much less a plagiarism expert. That role was forced upon me approximately four years ago when I discovered that nearly six years worth of my poetry and literature” had been stolen (Bailey, 2006). The discovery of the theft occurred when someone asked if the author’s work was on more than one site; it was subsequently determined that the individual who had reproduced this author’s work had done so by creating a mirror site, using a different name. Individuals who write articles online and post them to article sites also complain about theft (Article Plagiarism, 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. So pervasive is the problem of plagiarism, there are numerous websites and even a new scholarly journal, *Plagiary*, which, according to the journal's associated website, was created: "To bring together the various strands of scholarship which already exist on the subject, and to create a forum for discussion across disciplinary boundaries" (Lesko, 2005). The aforementioned journal is associated with a sister website, which addresses more famous cases of plagiarism and their perpetrators, appropriately named: FamousPlagiarists.com (Lesko, 2004). According to the site's home page:

It just goes to show that even the best authors—including some of our most (in)famous writers, politicians, scientists, civil rights activists, science fiction authors, theologians, musicians, historians, and even international terrorists—are not above stealing the words and ideas of others.

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).

According to enrollment records, these 18 cases were among those submitted by (or due from) 176 students who were distributed in seven sections over the three semester period. This paper also discusses preventative measures which were in place during the period under observation as well as additional steps which are under consideration for implementation. Table 1, below, provides additional data with respect to the distribution of the successfully prosecuted cases:

Table 1
Confirmed Plagiarism Cases

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 from course records and findings from Judicial Affairs wherein students were determined to be “responsible.”

An examination of the latest reported campus-wide data from the institution’s Office of Judicial Affairs (Judicial Affairs, 2005) provides some additional insight, with some limitations. First, the reporting period for the Judicial Affairs data only overlaps the data collection period used by the author of this paper; the two data sets intersect during the spring 2005 semester. Second, the campus-wide data covers the period from summer 2004 to spring 2005 (ending on May 31, 2005). Notwithstanding these limitations, it is perhaps interesting to note that campus-wide, there were 123 academic misconduct violations during the aforementioned year-long reporting period. During the spring 2005 semester (as can be seen in Table 1), 7 of the successfully prosecuted business plan cases are presumed to be a subset of the 123 annual cases, reported campus-wide.

Given that there are 800 full-time faculty and as of fall 2005, reported enrollment was 22,554 students (Facts About, 2006), the 7 cases in a single semester, representing 5.7 percent of the total cases campus-wide (for an entire year) seems disproportionately high. As can be seen in Table 2, below, about ten percent of all students from whom business plans were collected (or due), based on course enrollments were found to be responsible for plagiarism in connection with their submitted business plans.

Total Cases During Observation Period

Term	N (Students)	Cases	Sections
Spring 2006	81	10	3
Fall 2005	17	1	1
Spring 2005	78	7	3
TOTALS	176	18	
	Percent	10%	0.102272727

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 three semesters under observation (which, unfortunately, are not the same three semesters for which campus-wide data were available).

Insert Figure 1 about here

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 disappointing findings within the literature (primarily business ethics related research), which suggest that changing ethical behavior or values may be difficult (Kidwell, Wozniak, & Laurel, 2003).

If there is the possibility of combating plagiarism, researchers would probably be in agreement with the adage, “an ounce prevention is worth a pound of cure” (McCabe, 2005; Peppas & Diskin, 2001; Sims, 2002; von Dran, Callahan, & Taylor, 2001). Some researchers have suggested the implementation of an honor code (Kidwell, Wozniak, & Laurel, 2003), and accrediting bodies (Peppas & Diskin, 2001) as well as trends in business school curricula indicate increasing interest in ethics courses and content; these may or may not change anything (Peppas & Diskin, 2001; Sims, 2002; von Dran, Callahan, & Taylor, 2001; Wright, 2004).

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 are either contractually (Frequently Asked, 2005) or morally obligated to take steps to curtail plagiarism, (or that for whatever reason or reasons that remain unspecified, 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.

In this author's case, a business plan grading rubric (Lahm, 2006), which is distributed early in the semester (and discussed), also includes an academic integrity/plagiarism statement, as follows:

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).

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).

According to the FAQ’s published by the university with which the author of this paper is presently associated (Frequently Asked, 2005), additional sanctions remain undisclosed to faculty members “due to FERPA” (regulations protecting the privacy of student information); however, the following is suggestive of what those additional sanctions may be:

When a student is found responsible for academic misconduct, are they automatically suspended or expelled from MTSU? Not necessarily. We deal with violations on a case-by-case basis. Suspension and expulsion are two possible sanctions, but other sanctions may also include a written reprimand, probation, and/or various educational sanctions such as research assignments and papers.

Methods of detection (discussed below) should be briefly outlined, with a (recommended) emphasis on the instructor’s intention to use technology and any other means available to thwart students’ attempts to engage in the unacceptable behavior. 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.

The implications of post-course discovery of plagiarism in connection with submitted work (and this author’s teaching practices) have not been fully contemplated, but they remain worthy of additional personal reflection as well as discourse among all educators. Thus far, it has been this author’s practice to collect students’ work in hard copy form, and return that work to them after it has been graded. Future steps to curtail plagiarism might include the development of specific signatory instruments which would serve as a statement of understanding that: 1) a copy of all submitted materials will be required in both electronic and hard-copy form, and these archived materials will be held indefinitely; 2) materials are subject to review during the course and at any time in the future; and 3) post-course discover may result in future prosecution and the revocation of earned grades. Although the above described future steps have not been fully developed, or investigated relative to the feasibility of implementation, it has occurred to this author that the very idea that a previous instance of cheating could be discovered later may serve as a deterrent.

METHODS OF DETECTION

With the advent of new ways to cheat (Chapman, Davis, Toy, & Wright, 2004; Groark, Oblinger, & Choa, 2001; Kleiner & Lord, 1999; Owings, 2002; Smith, Davy, & Easterling, 2004), particularly those associated with the Internet and technology, new ways to beat plagiarism have also arisen. Websites and new technologies (software and services) that are being made available to educators and institutions are constantly emerging (Martin, 2005; Nitterhouse, 2003; Young, 2001). Rather than exhaustively review these sites and tools in this paper (especially since they have been well reviewed elsewhere), it is suggested that interested entrepreneurship educators utilize a simple search engine string such as “detect plagiarism”; as

of this writing, a *Google* search returned over 272,000 hits (retrieved August 31, 2006). The remainder of this section will address some practical ways to detect plagiarism in business plans, most of which can be effectively implemented by entrepreneurship educators who have access to an Internet connection.

In reading submitted business plans, changes in the writer's tone or style may be a tip-off that he or she is copying from other sources. Beyond style, passages that switch back and forth from clean, well written text, to text that is riddled with errors is often another indication. The use of terms that seem beyond the grasp of the student's level of writing proficiency can be an indicator (Owings, 2002). In one of the cases associated with those being reported in this paper, the student's use of the word "infomediary" raised suspicions; it was subsequently determined that the student turned in an entire existing plan which was found on the Internet, except for the student's name on the title page. Plans that are "too perfect," and too complete, also tend to raise suspicions. It is acknowledged that the capabilities of the student population may render some of the above techniques easier, or more challenging.

All of the prosecuted cases discussed in this plan were originally detected using either search strings on popular Internet search engines; side-by-side comparison with plans submitted by classmates (among all course sections, within a given semester); and comparison with sample business plans in Business Plan Pro software. Using quotes (on most search engines), unique text strings, words, and even dollar amounts in financial statements have led to a majority of original sources. This author does not, as yet, have desktop access to some plagiarism software and tools that would be desirable. However, graduate teaching assistants (who may be involved with a first reading of submitted business plans) have been trained in the above methods, and as such have proven instrumental in detecting several plagiarism cases.

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY

Some educators may look the other way and ignore plagiarism (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley Jr., & Washburn, 1998; McCabe, 2005). Keith-Spiegel and Tabachnick, et al (1998) employed a factor analysis in research which suggested reasons why cheating might be ignored; these reasons were reported as: "insufficient evidence" (the most frequent); "emotional reasons" (described as either due to "stress" or a "lack of courage"; "difficult reasons" (referring to "extensive time and effort required to deal with cheating students"; "fear reasons" ("concern about retaliation or a legal challenge"); and "denial reasons."

According to the experience of this author, as it relates to the decision to enforce academic integrity policies and the impact thereof, concerns about each of the issues suggested by the above findings seem justified. It is not always easy to find evidence; the experience is stressful; finding, documenting, prosecuting, and dealing with the aftermath of plagiarism cases has been extremely time consuming, and difficult; concerns for career consequences exist (especially the fear of creating a reputation among students that leads to diminished popularity and lower student ratings). Despite official statements on the part of academic administrations to the contrary, it is not uncommon to encounter faculty within the academy at large who suggest concern over student ratings as the *de facto* basis for judging a given instructor's teaching performance. Hence, some faculty may be concerned over career consequences as a result of student retaliation through ratings systems.

Relative to this author's own career concerns, a prior mid-western institution did indeed emphasize student retention as a strategic objective. It is believed that in circumstances such as these, as a consequence, an organizational culture can emerge wherein students publicly voice

intentions – that is, openly threaten (Owings, 2002) – to control faculty behavior through student opinion surveys, complaints, and similar tactics. However, faculty who share similar concerns might be advised that one should systematically document all such threats and instances of cheating. This is because it is also the case that in such environments, students' own proven tendencies toward academic dishonesty and coercive behaviors serve to invalidate the very ratings that they threaten to utilize against a faculty member.

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.

To be realistic, enforcement is probably an individual entrepreneurship educator’s own choice (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley Jr., & Washburn, 1998), notwithstanding any contractual responsibilities (or a willingness to ignore those responsibilities as well as the acts of plagiarism themselves). This author’s fear is that academic dishonesty may have already established itself as a systemic, inexorable problem, and that battling cheaters is indeed exactly like fighting cockroaches (Bartlett & Smallwood, 2004): for every one that you do see, there are many more lurking just out of sight. Given the landscape, any educator in any discipline should be compelled to ask, “Who, among my own students, might be cheating?”

While some faculty may ignore this phenomenon, others may simply be unaware that their perceptions may differ from those of students (Kidwell, Wozniak, & Laurel, 2003); of course, sadly, even members of the academy and professions plagiarize, too. At the same time, officials may turn their heads, appease students so as to retain their tuition dollars, or even try to cover up cheating, to protect the reputation and image of both individuals and institutions (Bartlett & Smallwood, 2004; Groark, Oblinger, & Choa, 2001; Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley Jr., & Washburn, 1998). Hence, as it pertains to suggestions for future research, one might begin by contemplating: “Given the pervasiveness of cheating, why should entrepreneurship education, relative to the integrity of business plans submitted by students, be immune?”

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Figure 1, Confirmed Plagiarism Cases

