The Wrongs of Plagiarism: Ten Quick Arguments

BROOK J. SADLER
University of South Florida

Abstract: I offer ten arguments to demonstrate why student plagiarism is unethical. In sum, plagiarism may be theft; involve deception that treats professors as a mere means; violate the trust upon which the professor-student relationship depends; be unfair to other students in more than one way; diminish the student’s education; indulge vices such as indolence and cowardice; foreclose access to the internal goods of the discipline; diminish the value of a university degree; undercut creative self-expression and acceptance of epistemic limitations; and undermine the vital interpersonal component of higher education. Plagiarism warrants severe penalties that effectively combat the student’s presumptive competitive strategy for individual success.

Having confronted many students with evidence of their plagiarism, I have observed a pattern of response. First, there is—you guessed it—denial: I didn’t do it. Pressed again with the incontrovertible nature of the evidence, students retreat to a second stance: admission that the evidence does point to plagiarism coupled with a desperate appeal to (usually absurd) excuses. Among the excuses I have heard are: It’s not my fault because my mother wrote my paper for me; This is how I always write my papers and none of my other professors ever said anything (this from a fifth-year senior about to graduate); It was a computer problem—my printer mistakenly printed up the passages from the website instead of what I wrote; I accidentally turned in my roommate’s paper (leaving unexplained how this student’s name got on the front of it). After the airing of such excuses, a long moment of silence or an obvious rejoinder to demonstrate the flimsiness of the excuse usually suffices to move the student to a third stage of response, capitulation: Okay, I did it, guilty as charged. It is convenient at that point to move directly to discussion of the penalty for the offense. There is a strong urge to bring the uncomfortable situation to a close and to allow the guilty student to skulk away. At some point, after confronting several
plagiarizing students, I started to wonder, though, whether they had any idea why there was a penalty for plagiarism, and I began to ask students two questions: Do you know that plagiarism is wrong? Do you know why plagiarism is wrong? The answer to the first was invariably “yes,” which explained the third stage of response—guilty as charged. Students guilty of plagiarism do not need to be convinced that they are guilty of wrongdoing. But, the answer to the second question was usually met with a shrug or a stammering attempt to own up to “cheating.” Perhaps, I reflected, the prevalence of plagiarism among students could be partly attributed to the fact that they have only the most minimal understanding of why it is wrong. Without a clear understanding of why plagiarism is wrong, the motives for plagiarizing (such as fear of failure) will easily defeat the student’s tenuous sense that there is something unethical at stake in doing so. The rules against plagiarism may come to seem weak, unauthorized except for the arbitrary fiat of professors, unduly finicky and punctilious people that they are.

What is wrong with plagiarism? The question is seldom considered. Though we warn students against plagiarism, instruct them as to what constitutes plagiarism, and outline the penalties for the offense, we take for granted that students understand why plagiarism or academic dishonesty is wrong. Indeed, we may have only a vague conception ourselves of what is wrong with plagiarism, gesturing at ideas such as cheating, dishonesty, or theft. In this essay, I offer ten quick, interrelated arguments to establish the wrongness of plagiarism. At the end, I briefly address what sort of penalty for plagiarism seems appropriate based on these considerations.

I begin by setting aside the possibility that plagiarism, in some cases, violates the law. Although plagiarized student papers do sometimes violate copyright laws, very rarely do students attempt to publish their plagiarized papers. Their papers are rarely read by anyone other than the professor or teaching assistant, confining the actual harms of plagiarizing to a limited context. The published authors whose works are filched are seldom aware of the crime, and professors and universities rarely take legal action against plagiarizing students. Moreover, some forms of plagiarism consist in copying material that is not copyrighted. Sometimes students copy the work of another student, with or without his or her knowledge. Sometimes, they buy papers from online paper mills, or paste snippets of text from a variety of internet sources into their papers. The central concern with student plagiarism is not, then, the legal infraction it may constitute. Rather, plagiarism is perceived as an ethical violation, and there are several reasons why it is wrong.

First, plagiarism, regardless of the copyright issue, can be viewed as a type of theft: the taking of someone else’s property and using it as one’s own. This sort of analysis applies best when a student simply
steals another student’s work—literally taking another student’s paper, often belonging to a roommate. But this explanation will not apply when, for instance, the roommate has volunteered to give away her own work or when the paper was purchased online.

Second, plagiarism involves the intent to deceive. Deception is usually, but not always, wrong. Deception may be justified under certain circumstances—for instance, where some great good is to be achieved or people’s fundamental rights are to be upheld. However, such justifying conditions are not present in the case of student plagiarism. The only thing to be gained by a student’s plagiarism is a better grade for him or her if the plagiarism is not detected. Putting the point in Kantian terms, the wrong of deception involves treating another as a mere means. The plagiarizing student regards the professor as a mere means to a grade by acting in a way to which the professor could not in principle consent.² That is, the professor would not consent to grading a paper that is not the student’s own work; for, the point of grading is, in part, to evaluate the student’s progress—not simply to assess the quality of any random piece of writing—and to provide feedback to enhance the student’s learning. Neither of these ends can be achieved by grading a plagiarized paper. Hence, the professor’s activity in grading is one that is predicated on academic honesty; when students knowingly deceive professors about their work, they enlist professors in an activity to which professors would not consent were they fully informed.

Third, plagiarism violates the trust upon which higher education is established. Students trust that professors will do their best to give them an honest education—not unduly biased, not misrepresenting the facts, not deliberately omitting relevant evidence, not distorting the findings of research in the field, not grading students’ work on the basis of prejudice, personal feeling, or arbitrary criteria. As we are aware, of course, not all professors maintain their part of this trust, and that is wrong. But students also have a part to play in maintaining trust. Professors give time and energy to educating students on the presumption that students are open to being educated. When a student commits any form of academic dishonesty, he or she is shutting-down the possibility of being educated; the student does not learn from the effort required to produce the work on her own, nor from the constructive feedback the professor gives in grading the assignment. When professors give substantial time and attention to their grading of student papers, that effort is worthless if the papers are not the student’s own work. When a paper is plagiarized, the professor’s careful comments cannot assist a student in becoming a better writer, since the comments do not address the student’s own writing. Nor can the feedback challenge the student to produce better arguments or to reflect upon her assumptions
in formulating her arguments, since they were not her own arguments or assumptions to begin with. In short, when the paper is not the student’s own work, the professor’s comments cannot really reach the individual student to provoke new avenues of reflection, to inspire improvement, or to assist in identifying her particular weaknesses as a writer and offer her the instruction necessary to overcome them. Plagiarism has a gravely dispiriting effect on professors who care about teaching. I hazard the observation that there is a direct correlation here: The more a professor cares about teaching, the more she is distressed by academic dishonesty. To teach well requires more than knowledge and love of the subject; it requires care for students as individuals and respect for their individual capacities to learn and to express themselves. When students misrepresent their work, they also misrepresent themselves, undercutting the implicit trust that informs the teacher-student relationship: Just as the student must trust that the teacher is knowledgeable and fair in order to believe that there is something to be gained from her teaching, the teacher must trust that the student is honest and receptive in order to believe that there is something to be gained by her teaching. The trust that underwrites education, especially university education, is disrupted, even annihilated, by academic dishonesty.

Fourth, plagiarism is unfair to other students in the class. Especially when the source of the plagiarism is a professional research paper, the plagiarized paper may be much better than the work produced by other students in the class. If a professor does not detect the plagiarism, the fact that the plagiarized paper is of higher quality than others throws off a professor’s sense of her students’ capabilities regarding the material covered by the assignment. It makes the work of honest students appear comparatively weak. This has two detrimental effects. One is that it may alter a professor’s grade scale, disadvantaging honest students. For example, students who might have received A’s may receive B’s, if the best paper in the class, setting the standard for an A, was plagiarized and the plagiarism goes undetected. Whether this is so depends on the professor’s method for assigning grades, but it is a distinct possibility whenever grades are assigned by a method that compares students’ achievements. The second detrimental effect is that plagiarism makes it difficult for a professor to assess the effectiveness of her instruction. Reading student papers helps professors to assess which ideas or concepts students understood and which ones they had difficulty with, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. This information aids professors in revising their instruction and assignments. When the data (student papers) misrepresents student abilities (because of plagiarism or academic dishonesty), the very quality of the teaching is threatened since professors may rely upon that data to adjust their instruction. Thus, plagiarism undermines the
professor’s effort to mold her instruction to students’ actual abilities and does an injustice to other students who stand to benefit from that instruction.

Fifth, a student who plagiarizes does not benefit from the process of struggling with the material on her own. She does not truly learn the material or engage the assignment. The quality of her education is thereby diminished. She does not acquire the skills that the assignment requires her to exercise or to develop. With respect to writing papers, a large part of the value of the assignment consists not in the finished product, but in the process of working on it.

Sixth, the plagiarizing student indulges in vices distinct from the deception mentioned above. The vice will depend upon the student. Perhaps it is laziness or a kind of cowardice borne of low self-esteem: The student says, in effect, “This is hard. I am afraid I will fail. So, I won’t even try.” Indulging this attitude perpetuates the student’s inability, ensuring that she does not acquire the skills needed to succeed. The (undetected) plagiarized paper that gets a good grade reinforces the belief that the only way to success is dishonesty, foreclosing the possibility that success (a good grade) could be achieved through effort or that success may consist in the effort, not the grade. Plagiarizing students thus habituate themselves to indolence, dishonesty, cowardice, or low self-esteem and incapacitate themselves to do the kind of work assigned.

Seventh, students who get away with academic dishonesty may come to believe, quite generally, that the best way to “get ahead” in life is to cheat, deceive, violate trust, or take the easy route. Such a belief may undercut the student’s ability to partake of the internal goods of a wide variety of practices, limiting his or her rewards to the external goods of money or status and instilling a corollary belief that the primary attainments in life are gained through competition with others, not through cooperation or by challenging oneself to meet the standards of excellence established by practices. Moreover, I believe (though I am not sure how one could prove the point) that academic dishonesty is likely to inspire further forms of reprehensible dishonesty, especially in other institutional settings. Academic dishonesty promotes the idea that the people one encounters in institutions (like the university) do not matter as people, as individuals, that they are merely a means to one’s own private ends. If a student’s view of his or her professor is guided by the attitude that the professor exists only to provide the student with what the student antecedently wants (a good grade, a degree), the student fails to see the professor-student interaction as a relationship between individuals, and fails to see education as an active process through which antecedent desires and ends may be transformed or revalued. The student enters the educational arena as a
self-interested competitor, in an adversarial stance toward instructors and other students. When this attitude is tolerated, overlooked, or even promoted in the university, it would not be surprising were students to carry it with them to other public contexts, disposing them toward the same kind of anonymous interactions with others, based on privately held ends, competitively fought for on the grounds of self-interest. Such an outlook promotes the idea that public institutions like the university advance no significant social goods and serve no greater purpose than to provide the means to the individual’s own private ends.

Eighth, unpunished academic dishonesty diminishes the value of a university degree. Employers expect students who graduate from a university to have certain demonstrable skills acquired in their education. For philosophy students, foremost among these “marketable” skills is the ability to write well. Students who plagiarize their way through the degree do not possess these skills. They have not truly earned the degree. This approach is not universalizable; if all students received unearned degrees, there would be no point to giving degrees. In addition, insofar as plagiarizing students fail to master the relevant concepts, arguments, texts, or ideas, conferring degrees upon them degrades the public perception of the value of higher education. When university-educated students do not possess the skills or knowledge to participate intelligently in public discourse or business, it is no wonder if the public harbors a suspicion about the value of higher education. Students who plagiarize are “free-riders” on the system, exploiting the system for their own advantage while undercutting its purpose and value.

Ninth, plagiarism and academic dishonesty preclude opportunities for the student both to take pride in creative self-expression and to come to terms with one’s epistemic and intellectual limitations. It is sometimes supposed that the problem with plagiarism is that it violates a value characterized as intellectual or scholarly integrity; however, the average (undergraduate) student does not see her- or himself as involved in a long-term intellectual project whose integrity is at stake. The student is simply writing a paper as outlined by the professor’s assignment. Rightly, the student does not see her paper as making a contribution to the academic discipline or field of inquiry; she does not see her writing as contributing to a larger field of research. Her knowledge and skills are limited, as is the aim of the assignment, and there is no expectation that her work will be disseminated to other scholars or researchers. Hence, the appeal to intellectual or scholarly integrity seems misplaced; research in the field will not be jeopardized by her lapses in citation or misrepresentation of others’ work. Nonetheless, it is awareness of the circumscribed nature of students’ papers that can afford students the opportunity to recognize their own epistemic
and intellectual limitations in a way that inspires appreciation for the achievements of researchers and scholars. In confronting the difficulty of producing their own work, students stand to gain a valuable form of humility that may inspire further education and stoke curiosity at the same time that it inspires students to take pride in their own intellectual development and to value their own creative expression.

Tenth, one of the ideas behind higher education is that students can learn something from their courses, from their assignments, from their professors that they cannot learn (at all, as easily, or as well) outside of the university. Since most of what professors teach—the texts and problems and methods—is available through libraries or other resources, the value of university education must consist in something more than the mere content of these texts. One of the distinctive values of university education consists in the interpersonal engagement that happens between students and between professors and students. The university does not exist merely to serve as a conduit for the transference of information: from (anonymous) professor to (anonymous) student, as if the process consisted simply in the handing-off of pre-packaged goods, each package containing exactly the same, precisely-measured and weighed contents, stamped with a bar-code ensuring uniformity. The interpersonal engagement that constitutes higher-education transforms the content of what is taught and what it means. We do not merely circulate a product, knowledge; we engage each other as knowers. Although I think this must represent the normative ideal in any discipline, it is especially and profoundly true for the discipline of philosophy in which we seek to transform ourselves through argument, analysis, and the exchange of ideas. Academic dishonesty or plagiarism effaces the student; it presents someone else (through the plagiarized paper) in the place of the student herself. Implicit in this act is the belief that higher education consists in the transference of content: The student hands-off to the professor a piece of content, picked-up from elsewhere (the internet, the library, another student), which the professor will stamp with a grade and return, as though all that were involved were an assessment of the quality of the product, an act exactly like assessing a carton of eggs and stamping it grade A. Although grades do represent assessments of quality, the act of grading papers and engaging with students’ work involves more than this; it involves an engagement with a particular student’s struggle to express herself, to navigate concepts, to enlarge her worldview, to come to know and to understand. This engagement is not possible when a student plagiarizes, and if I am right that one of the fundamental and distinguishing features of higher education is the interpersonal engagement it affords, then plagiarism thwarts or defeats that purpose.
As the foregoing ten arguments suggest, the wrongs of academic dishonesty far outreach the simple charge that plagiarism is cheating or stealing. Although gaining an unfair advantage by cheating is wrong, if one sees the enterprise of higher education as primarily a competitive arena, the temptation to cheat will remain strong. And if one sees academic work primarily as a product and education primarily in terms of the transference of content from one person to another—rather than as a process by which students exercise skills, develop abilities, express their individuality, and gradually come to participate in the construction of knowledge—stealing will remain a reasonable (though unethical) strategy for individual success. The arguments I have offered for thinking that plagiarism is seriously wrong turn our attention beyond the simple charge that plagiarism is wrong because it is stealing or cheating. Plagiarism is wrong because it is detrimental to students, to professors, to the university, to the project of higher education, and even to the public perception of the value of higher education.

Acknowledging the seriousness of the wrong of plagiarism says nothing about how to respond to it. I have found that a strict policy works well. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are fewer cases of plagiarism in classes where the penalty for plagiarism is known to be severe and to be enforced. If the penalty for plagiarism is to serve as a disincentive or deterrent, it must combat the student’s assumption that plagiarism serves his or her interest. Short of expounding philosophically on the value of trust and the aims of higher education, i.e., rehearsing the foregoing arguments, and attempting to convince students that academic honesty actually serves their larger interests better than academic dishonesty, one way to deter plagiarism is simply to make it a bad bet. The minimum penalty for plagiarism in my courses is failing the course, not merely failing the assignment. If the penalty for plagiarism is merely an F for the assignment, then a student may reasonably gamble that if the plagiarized paper goes undetected, she may get an A on the assignment, while if it is detected, the worst she can get is an F, which she predicts she would get anyway if she wrote the paper herself. The risk of an F on the assignment is worth the possibility that she’ll get an A. To make plagiarism a bad bet, the penalty must be more severe. If a student knows that she will fail the whole semester, not just the assignment, then the cost of getting caught plagiarizing on any given assignment outweighs simply failing the assignment honestly. Of course if a student has reason to believe that plagiarism is rarely detected or that the penalties are rarely enforced, then it may still be reasonable for her to risk plagiarism; a strict policy must be adjoined to a reasonable effort to detect plagiarism and to enforce the policy. There are alternative policies that may achieve the same result, but they must be structured in such a way as to counteract
the student’s perception that a dishonest approach is a reasonable bet for success in the course.

When there is a strict policy, it is important that students are duly informed about what plagiarism is or what constitutes academic dishonesty—not just in general, but with respect to the specific parameters of a given assignment. Perhaps because students are already aware that plagiarism is wrong, they are often reluctant to admit that they are not quite sure what it is. Such an admission would be akin to their owning up to not really knowing what cheating is—to voice such uncertainty seems to suggest a reproachable and embarrassing moral ignorance. However, academic dishonesty and plagiarism are particular forms of ethical concern that arise in a particular context that may be new to students, so it is not surprising that they may be unsure about what constitutes these ethical transgressions. It is important to provide students with information and examples of proper and improper citation and quotation and instructions about how to conduct research and how to properly integrate the material they discover in other texts into their own discussion in their papers.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge a bright and honest anonymous student—she knows who she is—for prompting me to explain what is wrong with plagiarism.

1. For the purposes of this essay, I count plagiarism as one form of academic dishonesty. I include under the category of plagiarism any form of misrepresenting a piece of writing or text as one’s own. This would include failure to cite sources appropriately, not naming or acknowledging sources, presenting the work of another student as one’s own, buying a paper and turning it in as if one had written it oneself, etc.


3. For this view of social practices and their relationship to the internal goods and external goods, see Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd ed., 1984).

Brook Sadler, Department of Philosophy 226-FAO, University of South Florida, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, Tampa FL 33620; bsadler@cas.usf.edu