Guide to Advising International Students about Academic Integrity

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According to the 2011 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, the number of international students in the United States increased 4.68 percent over the previous year for a total of 723,277 students” (Institute of International Education, 2011). More and more institutions of higher education are intentionally seeking to increase their international student population by actively recruiting students from other countries. Reasons cited for this burgeoning interest in international students include maintaining the United States’ competitiveness in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, improving the image of the United States globally, and aiding U.S. national security efforts (Pandit, 2007).

The rising influx of international students studying in the United States has impacted colleges and universities in a variety of ways. A notable impact has been the “pedagogical benefits of having international students in the classroom” (Pandit, 2007, p. 157). For U.S. students who are unable to study abroad, having the opportunity to interact with international students on their own campuses is invaluable in terms of learning about different cultures and perspectives. Through exchange agreements and research collaboration, universities are benefiting from the international research capacity and connection provided by the students (Pandit, 2007). Another benefit, beyond that of higher education, is the fact that international students contribute $15 billion to the U.S. economy in the form of money spent on tuition and living expenses (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009).

However, universities also face challenges in hosting international students, notably in the realm of cheating, because the Western construct of plagiarism differs from that of other countries. As a social construct and a culturally embedded assumption, the idea of plagiarism is foreign to many international students but can result in serious consequences for students so accused in the United States. The purpose of this article is to discuss how different cultures view plagiarism and to provide tools to help international students understand how to comply with U.S. standards regarding plagiarism.

The Prevalence of Plagiarism

In the United States, the issue of plagiarism—including the relationship between honor codes and the prevalence of academic dishonesty on college campuses—has been heavily researched for decades (McCabe & Makou’ski, 2001; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999). Organizations such as the Center for Academic Integrity, housed in Clemson, South Carolina, claim that more than 70 percent of students surveyed in large-scale inquiries admitted to some form of cheating (East, 2010). However, according to Lambert, Hogan, and Barton (2003, p. 2), in the United States, “there is significant variation in the total number of students who admit to cheating.” A study done by Lambert et al. (2003) concluded that 83 percent of students admitted to some form of cheating, some students more than once. Recent studies and anecdotal evidence among researchers in the field suggest plagiarism in on the rise in Western countries (Ashworth, Freewood, & Macdonald, 2003; Hayes & Introna, 2005). In general, students plagiarize for a variety of reasons, including academic pressures, poor planning, poor preparation, excessive or mindless workload, opportunity, cultural background, and prominent bad examples (Thomas, 2004).

Are international students plagiarizing more or less than American students? Regardless of the answer, the factor contributing to their cheating may be different than for the traditional U.S. student. The studies presented above revealed that the errant student was aware and admitted
to cheating, whereas an international student faces a different problem: he or she is most often unaware of any wrongful behavior. Not only are these students unaware but due to cultural differences, as mentioned by Thomas (2004), students may not regard plagiarism in the same light as Western students.

**Cultural Issues to Consider for New Incoming International Students**

Overseas students transport to the United States their values, religious beliefs, customs, and assumptions, all of which are products of their societal upbringing. Social norms, academic practices, and communication styles are a few of the many differences newcomers to the United States encounter in this country. International students often experience initial culture shock upon arriving in the United States. Their cultural adjustment process is further complicated by having to learn to navigate their host institution’s culture and expectations, including enrolling in classes, learning about campus policies and procedures, and overcoming any language barriers that might exist (Duff, Rogers, & Harris, 2006).

One campus policy that many international students may not be aware of at American institutions is the institution’s definition of plagiarism. Duff et al. (2006) found that perceptions of plagiarism are based on historical and cultural assumptions. This is especially true for international students who did not grow up in Western society. Given that international students have left their homes and travelled many miles to pursue their academic dreams, they often feel enormous pressure to be very successful. This pressure combined with differing cultural assumptions of plagiarism and students’ lack of knowledge about plagiarism policies can potentially lead to scholastic disaster.

It is important to remember that plagiarism is a Western ideal. For example, “… the notion of ‘stealing’ another’s work has its origins in the peculiarly Western conjunction between the ‘growth of the notion of human right’ (freedom of speech) and the ‘stress on individual property’ (copyright)” (Duff et al., 2006, p. 675). Not all cultures subscribe to this point of view. For example, Scollon (1999) explains that students from Confucian-heritage countries, such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, value their source with the utmost authority, yet do not believe in citing their sources as expected in Western society (Duff et al., 2006). In addition, in the Confucian culture, using an author’s own words is a form of respect, making it difficult for students to understand Western standards and change their perspectives on this matter (Hayes & Introna, 2005). Furthermore, Hayes and Introna (2005) documented the case of an Indian student who declared that in his undergraduate institution more points were awarded to students who could reproduce from class notes and textbooks than to those who paraphrased. Lastly, researchers have proposed that students from overseas feel they cannot improve on what has already been said (Hayes & Introna, 2005). Thus international students in the United States may have difficulty truly understanding what plagiarism is, because it may have been an expected and highly regarded cultural norm in their home country.

**How Can Academic Advisers Help Educate International Students about Plagiarism?**

Given the challenges that international students studying in the United States may face when it comes to plagiarism, what can academic advisers do to help? Below are specific suggestions that advisers can adopt to help educate international students about plagiarism and guide them toward success at their host institutions.

**Provide Information About Plagiarism to New Students**

Academic advisers charged with orienting new international students should intentionally include information about the host university’s standard and the American concept of plagiarism (Duff et al., 2006). Even if plagiarism is not covered in the orientation, academic
advisers can share information and resources on this topic during their individual advising sessions with international students. Large institutions may have an academic integrity office or an international student services office that may have materials about plagiarism available for distribution to students during orientation or individual advising sessions. If there is an honor code on campus, make sure international students have a copy of the code, since “… honor codes may lead to lower levels of academic dishonesty because they clarify expectations and definitions of cheating behavior” (McCabe et al., 1999, p. 212).

**Share the Consequences of Plagiarism**

Academic advisers should be direct and frank in explaining that plagiarism is considered a violation of student conduct rules. It is important for advisers to emphasize to international students that ignorance is not an excuse for plagiarism. One way to start such a conversation is to say, “Every country has its own ideas about scholarship and cheating. In the U.S. we have a high standard for academic integrity. Your professor will expect you to complete your work on your own and that you will appropriately cite your references. I acknowledge that U.S. is neither right nor wrong in our Western ideal of what academic integrity is, but as a student in the U.S., it is in your best interest to be aware of, and abide by, these rules in order to be successful academically here. Here are some handouts from our academic integrity office that explain what plagiarism is and that provide examples of what constitutes plagiarism.” Students, including international students, will avoid plagiarism once they understand why it is important that they comply with the rules as well as how to properly express themselves in writing (Sabieh, 2002).

**Refer International Students to Appropriate Campus Resources**

If either the academic integrity or international student services office hosts workshops on plagiarism and/or other academic integrity topics, advisers should strongly encourage international students to attend. Academic advisers should also notify international students of other campus resources, such as writing center or professors.

**Notes on Other Cultural Differences**

Advisers working with international students should mention that the classroom etiquette in the United States is likely going to be different than in their home country. For example, in the U.S. professors typically expect students to actively participate in classroom discussions. Another example of different academic norms regards the availability and informality of the relationships between students and professors. Unlike the classrooms in other countries where the professors are considered masters of information and should never be challenged, in the United States, many professors welcome scholarly discussions and invite students to give their opinions. Academic advisers should encourage international students to visit faculty members during their office hours to ask questions about the class.

**Conclusion**

Plagiarism is a complex and troubling issue faced by institutions of higher education. The focus of this article has been on providing specific suggestions to academic advisers who wish to help international students avoid violating institutional policies on plagiarism. By adopting some of the strategies presented in this article, academic advisers can enhance their international students’ knowledge of the Western construct of plagiarism. This knowledge could mean the difference between expulsion and graduation for international students. The choice is clear—an ounce of prevention in this case can be worth a college diploma in the end.

**References**


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