23 August 2010

To: English Department faculty and graduate student instructors

From: Ellis Hanson, Roger Gilbert, and Stuart Davis

Re: Plagiarism in courses in our department

Following is a new edition of an advisory first authored in 2003 by Paul Sawyer and Stuart Davis and since maintained by the latter. It draws, often silently, on conversations with many colleagues, and it references resources both within and outside the University. Please direct questions on these matters to any of us and send suggestions for the next update to Stuart, currently the Department’s academic integrity contact person.

Students in writing and literature courses face challenges to their integrity that differ from (but do not exceed) those faced by students in other disciplines. Because we in English tend to teach smaller courses and require more original written work than do many other departments, we can reliably expect our students to do their own best work for us with great consistency. There is no evidence that plagiarism is burgeoning in the Department or at Cornell. But the growing size and use of the World Wide Web raise new concerns about the unacknowledged use of sources, and recent changes in information media give teachers reason to reflect on their ways of assigning and evaluating work. In this memo we first offer advice about preventing plagiarism, then give tips about recognizing offences, then offer recommendations for dealing with them when they occur. Sections 1 and 2 conclude with suggestions about making positive use of the Internet to help students treat source materials reliably and creatively in literary study.

One disclaimer. Nothing we say should suggest that it is instructors and not students who are to blame when academic integrity infractions occur. All students entering Cornell receive copies of the Academic Integrity Code – this year in an attractive pamphlet called The Essential Guide to Academic Integrity at Cornell -- and are responsible for observing its provisions. They are to blame when they commit infractions. Our job as teachers is to minimize the occasions for blame, using familiar institutional resources and some that may be unfamiliar to some department members.

All instructors should be familiar with the University's published Academic Integrity Code (on-line at http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/Academic/AIC.html) and with the University's Academic Integrity Handbook (September 2006, available from the Office of University Faculties or at 172 Goldwin Smith). These, together with the publication The Code of Academic Integrity and Acknowledging the Work of Others, may be downloaded from http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/policies/pol_main.html.

Three years ago the Arts College commissioned an on-line academic integrity tutorial authored by our then graduate student Mimi Yiu. Now available at http://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/, it is detailed, visually arresting, and not overlong. You may recommend or require that your students complete it.

1. Prevention

Here are the most effective measures.

A. Make clear to your students — on the first day of class or when a first written assignment is due — that you take their academic integrity seriously and that you will investigate and prosecute misdeeds. They will profit from being apprised, concretely, of the meaning of academic integrity standards in your discipline and your course, and they need to know of your positive interest in deterring offenses. Don't skirt this subject out of politeness and don’t moralize; politely, let them know you care.

In 2002 Cornell's Faculty Senate voted to recommend that every course syllabus contain a statement reminding students of their obligations under the Academic Integrity Code. Your statement should directly reference the on-line versions of the Code and Acknowledging the Work of Others. It is a good idea to mention of a definite penalty for infraction. The following is an example:

All the work you submit in this course must have been written for this course and not another and must originate with you in form and content, with contributory sources fully and specifically acknowledged. Make yourself familiar with Cornell’s Academic Integrity Code, distributed to students in the Policy Notebook and available on-line at http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/Academic/AIC.html. The code, together with a guide to Acknowledging the Work of Others, can be downloaded from http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/policies/pol_main.html. In this course, the normal penalty for a violation of the code is an "F" for the term. Such a statement should be the beginning, not the end of your discussion of the subject.

B. You should also let your students know which kinds of mutual assistance you countenance — peer review of essay drafts, for example, or joint projects. In explaining these limits, keep in mind the Academic Integrity Code's "Examples of Violations": "knowingly representing the work of others as one's own" and "using, obtaining, or providing unauthorized assistance on . . . academic work" (our emphasis).

A typical statement:

Collaborative work of the following kinds is authorized in this course: peer review and critique of students' essays by one another and, when approved by

the instructor in particular cases, collaborative presentations by pairs or groups of students.

C. Avoid giving assignments that may prompt or invite plagiarism. These include vaguely defined topics, especially on frequently taught works, and assignments repeated unchanged from year to year. (Student residences may or may not be awash with old essays and exams, as some believe. But ours is a fairly small campus. The odds are high that a student in a course of yours will try to find — and often, will have legitimate reasons for wanting to see — work of other students in your or comparable courses in the past.)

It is hard to plagiarize an essay for an assignment with a specific focus or a distinctive spin. Instructors often vary assignments from semester to semester by asking direct and specifically worded questions, by designating particular passages (characters, episodes, stylistic features) to be discussed, or by supplying short excerpts from secondary sources that students will use as springboards or focusing devices for their essays.

D. If you want your students to devise their own topics (theses, arguments), ask them to attach notes and drafts to their finished work illustrating the development of their thought. (Successful essays in many courses are the result, not of one-shot assignments, but of sequences of staged writing projects, from jottings to finished drafts.) Ask students who wish to develop their own topics to confer with you about them in advance.

E. Don’t back students into corners. Many transgressions result from exhaustion, panic, or frank incomprehension of an assignment rather than a settled disposition to cheat. While maintaining clear expectations about timeliness, you can be sensitive to times in the semester when students are particularly busy or give signs of physical or emotional distress. Students respond well to controlled flexibility (short extensions given individually under special circumstances, a series of assignments one of which can be skipped at the student’s choice, and the like).

F. If your course is a First-Year Writing Seminar or a course in critical writing or research, it should teach students how to integrate sources in their work in order best to further original thought — together with the most appropriate forms of citation and reference. You may be using a writing handbook which includes models of documentation style or an authoritative guide such as the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th ed., 2009). A good short guide to the writing and documentation process for classroom use is Gordon Harvey's *Writing with Sources*, 2ed (Indianapolis, 2008).

But if such instruction is not on your agenda, we recommend that you nevertheless familiarize your students early on with a few models of appropriate citation and reference. The assignment sheet for a first paper in a literature course might include exemplary models for

- quoting and contextualizing material from a primary text;
- quoting from a print secondary source like a critical essay, and making full reference to that source;

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3 They will find such work with increasing ease through on-line social networks. A Facebook-affiliated group, CourseHero (http://www.coursehero.com/) now indexes student-contributed “study materials” (including essays and exercises) by course number and instructor’s name and offers access to them for paying membership or for barter. Thanks to Jessica Metzler for this news.

2. The Internet

The Net and especially the World Wide Web challenge students' integrity in new ways. They offer instructors tools for detecting and forestalling offenses.

A. What's out there

From the Internet, including sites available exclusively through Cornell University Library, you and your students will be able to recover a variety of sources familiar from print publication: original texts in literature in such compendia as Chadwyck's LION (Literature On-line); compilations of critical and scholarly essays; electronic periodicals; encyclopedias, dictionaries, and critical/biographical articles in such collections as Twentieth Century Authors and other literary databases. (CUL’s “Library Resources in English” is at [http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/english_outreach.html](http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/english_outreach.html).)

On the Net, you and your students will also encounter materials that blur the line between academic and popular discourse. These include "study guides" more voluminous and idiosyncratic than CliffsNotes; author biographies at websites dedicated to individual writers; line-by-line or chapter-by-chapter commentaries on major works; reviews and summaries accompanying offerings of books for sale; reviews of films and works in other popular media by vendors and enthusiasts; and the musings and monographs of autodidacts intrigued by the films of David Lynch, unusual theories of Shakespearean authorship, and the dimensions of the Great Pyramid. Students seeking enlightenment from a search engine or a casually organized subject directory will confront a flood of disparate materials "leveled" through indiscriminate compilation.

Writing with the look and feel of student discourse is available from sources of two kinds.

• Hundreds of commercial sites — some with in-your-face names like Schoolsucks.com ("Download your Workload"), Gradesaver, and the Evil House of Cheat, but others flying neutral flags like ResearchAid and ElectronicScholar — offer essays and reports with the lightly veiled purpose of promoting plagiarism. Most charge a per-page rate for what’s on the shelf and a stiff one for custom work. Those that offer free wares display products of stunningly low quality. Commercial sites often post synopses or teasers that will turn up on a Web search.

• Many websites post essays written for courses and published by the authors or their instructors. These are academic products; the best of them approximate what we want our students to achieve. There are excellent reasons for students to publish their work in this fashion and for instructors to
encourage them to do so, but nobody should be surprised if that work travels to inappropriate destinations.

**B. Checking**

If you suspect that a student's paper is plagiarized from an on-line source, you can search for it on line in several ways — none guaranteed to "clear" a paper if the yield is negative. These correspond to several common tools for finding Web materials.

1. **Subject directories**, of which the best known are Yahoo! (http://www.yahoo.com/), Librarians' Internet Index (http://lii.org), and Academic Info (http://www.academicinfo.net/). One of these will lead you through the layers of a large directory to the names of (for example) genres, themes, writers, books, or schools:

   Arts > Literature > Cultural > Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual > Authors > Rich, Adrienne

Such a search will yield a variety of websites that may catch your eye as likely sources. (Expect to spend time clicking on links to get to more links: that's the way the Web is structured.)

2. **Search engines**: these are services that search their own large databases (compiled by dutiful software robots while we sleep) for matches with keywords or strings of words that you enter. These have names like Lycos, Excite, and HotBot, but the best -- the most compendious and intelligently designed -- are probably Google (http://www.google.com/), Yahoo! search (http://search.yahoo.com/), and Exalead (http://www.exalead.com/). No one search engine indexes the whole Web, so try several. To search, take a distinctive string of words from the beginning of a paper or of a section where the style seems to change significantly, and enter it, in quotation marks if an exact match is sought. Or, if the search engine permits it, take several keywords and join them together with Boolean operators (AND, NOT, NEAR) and enter the string. Search engines will rank the results, explicitly or silently, by "confidence" rating, but their standards may not be yours; you will have to peruse several, perhaps many pages of results before you find an on-line source or conclude that there isn't one.

3. **Searchable textbases.** Full-text compilations of many serials in English studies are available on-line through library databases, as many students have discovered. Two major resources licensed to Cornell University Library are these, directly accessible through the catalogue:

   - The Literature Resource Center offers full-text series of over 300 journals and a number of proprietary reference works, easily searched. Go to the home page of the LRC and select Advanced

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4 Wikipedia, at http://en.wikipedia.org/ is not only a source favored by student plagiarists but a subject directory in itself. Articles are copiously linked and referenced, often to choice or recherché on-line materials.

5 These are among the chief recommendations of the best guide there is to WWW research tools, at U.C. Berkeley's magisterial library site. For a table evaluating search engines and offering advice on their use, go to http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/SearchEngines.html. Elsewhere on the site are recommendations for subject directories, searchable databases, and gateway pages.
Search. You will see fields in which to enter keywords or strings and picklists from which to select a “Fulltext” search.

• Likewise the Criticism and Reference section of Literature On-line (LION) includes reference works and a smaller number of full-text journals (about 170). To search on keywords or phrases, go to the main Search template and set the scope for “Criticism”; enter a distinctive string, then inspect the results.

Make no mistake: students continue to misuse materials of traditional kinds – print sources and other students’ work. Students may also, be it noted, give you thoroughly original work written with unexpected authority and polish. You should set limits to your quest for certainty and be willing to accept work whose origins remain uncertain.

C. Education

Properly used, the Internet is a godsend for those who would teach discriminating research methods and intelligent use of secondary source materials. Use the tools mentioned above to treat students as learners and researchers rather than suspected felons. From bad sources, they have much to learn about what makes good sources valuable — and, from well-composed and well-documented sources, much to learn about what their own work should look like. You can strengthen their critical skills by

• asking them to prepare annotated bibliographies of on-line as well as print material for assignments in your course, whether or not those lead to fully developed research papers;

• requiring them to consult on-line secondary or contextual materials, recommended by you or found by them, for certain written assignments;

• maintaining a course web page or discussion board for posting links to the best — or the worst, or funniest, or most bizarre — on-line materials on or allusions to course material;

• meeting your class from time to time in an instructional classroom programmed by the Academic Technology Center, the Library, or the Arts College to explore on-line resources as a group.

You can schedule a library instruction session for your course with a reference librarian at Olin/Uris/Kroch; you can also ask O/U/K Reference to prepare an on-line bibliography especially for your course combining electronic and print sources, together with clear advice about citation. (There’s an on-line request form at http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/instructsess.html. Contact is Tony Cosgrave, ajc5@cornell.edu. An assortment of pages done for particular courses is at http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/classbibs.html.) Such further use as you may make of the on-line world will depend on your pedagogic aims and your subject matter.

3. If you must act

The Academic Integrity Handbook specifies procedures applicable when you charge a student with an Academic Integrity offense. Read it and follow them. They protect you, your student, and the
institution, and they create a record that will help deter a further offense on the student’s part. Here are a few additional recommendations.

A. Visit a compendious new website pooling information on academic integrity proceedings at http://www.theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/AcadInteg/.

B. Consult on a case of suspected plagiarism with a colleague whose judgment and experience you trust, being sure to keep the student’s name in confidence where necessary. If you are a graduate student instructor, consult with your course leader. Agree on an appropriate way of dealing with the situation and with the charges that may result from it.

C. Keep copies of suspect material and of all your communications with a student whom you suspect of a violation. Retain these well after you have resolved the case.

D. Charge a student with plagiarism when you have at hand "clear and convincing" evidence that he or she has violated the Code. You should have at hand the student’s putative source, which should resemble the suspect work closely enough to create a “firm belief” in your mind that the material is derivative.

E. Don’t make deals with students in order to circumvent A.I. procedures. If the offense is serious enough to be called plagiarism, it should not be the subject of negotiation aimed at keeping it off the student’s record or allowing the student to drop the course. (The appropriate point at which to show leniency, should you choose to, is in the penalty phase.)

F. Each Arts College department now has a designated contact person who must be notified of academic integrity proceedings undertaken in it. In English, that person is now Stuart Davis. He will arrange for the presence of the independent witness required by the A.I. Code.

G. If you are the instructor, you are the one who must bring charges and conduct the first hearing, following the steps in the Handbook (notifying the student, setting a time and place, etc.) But course leaders should remain involved in the process at appropriate stages, supporting and advising instructors. Course leaders may not serve as independent witnesses for instructors whom they supervise, but a course leader or independent witness may preside at the primary hearing, letting the instructor present the case against the suspected violator and determine the finding and the penalty.

H. The Arts College's record keeper for academic integrity offenses is Debra Morey (dsm2@cornell.edu). Findings of guilt must be reported to her. (All findings sent to the student should be copied to the independent witness and the A.I. contact person.)

I. A member of the student's family or a legal advisor may seek to talk with you. Do not participate in any such discussion. Refer such inquiries to Dean Patricia Wasyliw of the College of Arts and Sciences (255-5004; pw36@cornell.edu). Dean Wasyliw will explain the nature of the judicial process to inquiring parties. Neither she nor you may discuss particulars of a student's academic or disciplinary situation with third parties, including parents, without the student’s express permission.

That’s all. We hope you have no need of any of this procedural advice.