CHAPTER 5

MAINTAINING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

INTRODUCTION

Universities are knowledge producers. Cheating, in its various manifestations, damages the integrity of the knowledge produced and destroys the reputation of students, professors, and the university. Academic integrity is concerned with moral and ethical issues, including respecting other’s dignity, rights, and property. Violations can include cheating on exams, falsifying documents, and unauthorized collaboration. This chapter deals specifically with plagiarism as it applies to thesis writing. Most universities focus their efforts on educating about and preventing plagiarism at the undergraduate level, as the majority of academic misconduct cases involve undergraduate students. Professors assume graduate students have learned how to properly cite as undergraduates. Their syllabi warn of the consequences of plagiarism, but rarely do they discuss what the misconduct entails. This chapter draws on academic literature concerning plagiarism and my experience as a code administrator to help students avoid committing academic misconduct when writing a thesis. Last, I offer advice on how to deal with a plagiarism charge.

At the most basic level, plagiarism is defined as claiming knowledge that is not one’s own. It can be lifted be from another student’s work or from a published source. It can also refer to images, formulae, music, and other forms (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). “Self-plagiarism,” occurs when students submit the same paper or work for two courses without their instructors’ permission. This is also called “multiple submission.”

Plagiarism can be deliberate or unintentional, but most university codes of conduct treat all offences as deliberate. It is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the deceptive and the desperate. Most code administrators report that they cannot ascertain whether students intended to cheat or if they are guilty of sloppy paraphrasing or have poor referencing skills (Pecorari, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Students are responsible for knowing and abiding by citation rules, and pleading ignorance will not make an offence disappear.

Intentional plagiarism is akin to premeditated murder, in that it is deliberate and planned (Park, 2003). At its worst, it involves buying a paper from an
Internet source or from another student, or hiring a ghostwriter to write a customized paper. Some ghostwriters use dated print sources to avoid being caught by online detection software. Professors know students use online sources and are suspect of a paper with many older references. Plagiarism can also involve copying a passage verbatim from another source without crediting the author. Unintentional plagiarism, on the other hand, might mean a student forgot to cite a paraphrased section of a paper or inadvertently left the page number off a direct quotation. Intentional or not, a plagiarism charge carries the weight of a moral failing.

International students have a high risk of being charged with plagiarism, and the literature suggests they make up the up the greatest number of misconduct cases (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Park, 2003). Researchers offer conflicting perspectives on why this is the case. Hayes and Introna (2005), for example, suggest that Asian students hold different views of what academic writing entails and have high respect for authority. Accordingly, these students state the author’s words and are reluctant to paraphrase or critique them. Gu and Brooks (2008) refute this claim, suggesting this is an overgeneralization and, in some cases, not based on fact.

I believe international students get caught plagiarizing because it is easy to detect copying in their written work. Course instructors are alerted to the possibility of plagiarism when the submitted work displays an inconsistent writing style. The copied section differs in style and tone from the rest of the paper. Students, who normally write short, simple statements, arouse suspicion when they suddenly use compound sentences with the correct use of colons and semicolons. Professors take note when the vocabulary and fluency of the written work is in sharp contrast with the student’s oral skills. At times, plagiarism is a result of poor time management. Students who study in languages different from their own must spend more time reading and writing than do their native speaking counterparts. However, graduate programs are competitive and international students are not given additional time to complete assignments. I also suspect that professors report international students more than others because they do not experience a bond with them. Often, these students are shy to participate in class because they have little confidence in their speaking skills, and they do not share a common popular culture with their professors. These students cannot discuss the professor’s favorite film during informal gatherings. Professors are less likely to take formal action against students with which they have a personal connection. The problem is acerbated in that some students are reluctant to