

## **Grade Expectations: Mapping Stakeholder Views of Online Plagiarism Detection**

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### **Abstract**

Based upon a pilot study of the leading online plagiarism detection service, this article examines the views of faculty and students as the main stakeholders in the controversy over online plagiarism detection. Rather than give advice outside of a specific institutional context, this study offers an understanding of the reasoning that informs the diverging points of view, explaining both support of and resistance to online plagiarism detection among each group. The article makes recommendations of best practices for those who choose to incorporate plagiarism detection services into course management. More importantly, the article closes with recommendations for addressing academic integrity on a campus-wide scale—a practice that could alleviate the pressures that encourage many campuses to adopt online plagiarism detection.

**Keywords:** Plagiarism, academic integrity, online source detection.

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A May 20, 2007, Associated Press story trumpets one of the greatest challenges to higher education: “Dishonesty persists at U.S. universities” (Pope). Studies continue to demonstrate that academic dishonesty is on the rise, with technology-assisted forms of plagiarism fueling a significant portion of the apparent surge. A 2002 study of 4,500 high school students conducted by the Rutgers Management Education System revealed that 75% had cheated, and, more disturbing, 50% of them saw nothing wrong with it (Shaw, 2005). Rutgers’ Don McCabe, perhaps the nation’s leading authority on trends in academic dishonesty, also surveyed 45,000 college students, finding that “37% admitted to what’s called ‘cut and paste’ plagiarism” (Shaw, 2005).

Our own informal surveys found that 89% of our students had cheated in high school, but less than 7% of the same respondents admitted to cheating in college. Perhaps some of the discrepancy results from the increasing maturity of the students as they progress through college, or the success of various strategies to prevent cheating, or the expectation of a more punitive outcome if the students are caught. The problems with self-reporting as a measurement tool cast a shadow of skepticism over any results; however, if this percentage held true, then 871 of our university’s 13,000 students have knowingly engaged in acts of academic dishonesty. Using McCabe’s figures, the number would be closer to 4,800 students cheating.

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Compounding the problem of researching how often students engage in cheating and what works to deter cheating is the unreliability of data about incidences of academic dishonesty on campuses. Because of the inconsistency in the handling of and reporting of incidences, reliable data across campuses simply do not exist. When individual faculty members are left to decide how and whether to handle cases of academic dishonesty, we have no way of knowing on a national or even campus-wide basis how often cheating occurs, how serious the cases are, or how it is handled. We can be relatively certain, however, from anecdotal evidence and from surveys like our own and McCabe's, that cheating happens more often than it is reported or discovered. Consequently, cheaters rarely suffer significant academic repercussions unless the cheating was particularly egregious, blatant, or habitual. When students know that repercussions are unlikely or minimal, our institutions lose an important deterrent to academic dishonesty.

A sense of themselves as consumers may drive some students to purchase a paper or to use the time and effort required to write a paper as an excuse for plagiarizing; this same consumer mentality causes many students to view cheating as a devaluation of their educational experience. Stories abound of students who, when confronted with evidence of a downloaded essay, claim that it is, indeed, "their own" work, since they paid for it. In the face of this, many students themselves openly acknowledge that cheating is a serious problem, and stories circulate of students approaching administrators to ask for help stemming the tide of academic dishonesty, out of fear that the cheaters are making their degrees "worth" less.

Traditional strategies such as unique assignments, multiple draft requirements, conferences, citation workshops and instruction, and a firm stance—in writing on the syllabus and in classroom discussions on academic dishonesty—do seem to have an impact. It also stands to reason that the more involved students—and their instructors—are in the learning and assessment process, the more specific and engaging assignments are, the more academic integrity we could expect. We would like to think that all instructors in all areas of campus strive for these pedagogical ideals, but the diverse nature of our areas of study, pedagogical backgrounds, course content, class sizes and comfort levels in the classroom keeps continuous assessment and process-based learning from being practiced consistently across the university.

Even in the best of scenarios, a process orientation in both teaching and assessment can be and often is circumvented by recycled essays, web resources, and online paper mills, where students can have an essay produced on any topic and with any combination of sources and even choose the level of grade they would like to receive. According to "Buying the Wrong Words," a Google search for "buy term paper" would produce 150 million hits and students could purchase a paper for as little as \$29.95 per page (Lyons, 2006). Many clever students acquire these papers and then tweak them to meet instructors' parameters, so we may be fooling ourselves when we think that unique assignments are enough to fight this type of plagiarism.

In fact, such cheating via paper mill sites prompted neurobiology professor John Barrie to create the leading online plagiarism detection service in the mid-90s. Barrie is not shy

about making his intentions clear: “If we can crush those sites like a bug, great” (cited in Lyons, 2006). For many campuses, online plagiarism detection has seemed to provide a consistent approach to the problem of academic dishonesty, one that does not rely on individual instructors to uphold the university’s ideals.

Everything about online plagiarism detection services, though, is controversial. Even deciding what to call the services involves choosing sides in an ideological battle. Should we call them “online source detection services,” sounding as neutral as possible and emphasizing the pedagogical potential in the technology’s ability to graphically illustrate for students their use of sources? Or should we call them “online plagiarism services,” leaning toward the side of the critics and emphasizing the crime-seeking potential of the technology? For the purposes of our study, we kept faithfully used “online source detection” so that we could encourage adoption of the technology and remain as neutral as possible. For this essay, however, we have switched to “online plagiarism detection,” in part because that term seems to be prevailing in the literature.

While online plagiarism detection services promise accuracy, reliability and ease of use, the technology itself may not have reached maturity. Making online plagiarism detection far less appealing are two of the conclusions of James Purdy’s (2005) study, “Calling off the Hounds: Technology and the Visibility of Plagiarism.” After comparing eight online plagiarism detection services and one free search engine for their ability to detect plagiarism in a set of documents, none of the services “performed appreciably better than Google” (p. 282). In addition, Purdy discusses rumors, albeit unsubstantiated, of possible connections between some online plagiarism detection services and online paper mills (p. 284). Others have also analyzed and compared the various services, including information technologists at the University of California at Santa Barbara, who compared seven services in nineteen different categories as a part of their development of their own detection system.

Wary of these problems, we set out to examine the possibilities the technology might hold for our own campus. While our own administration enthusiastically supports the exploration of new strategies for encouraging academic honesty, including honor code-supported courses and uses of emerging technologies, the university relies on examples that are over 40 years old—older than the vast majority of our students and even many of our faculty—to illustrate its policy on plagiarism. According to our associate provost, “the ease and prevalence of duplication and sharing of material may obscure ethical issues, and it is important for us, as educators, to address this phenomenon and the boundaries of academic honesty” (personal communication, 2006). Through the university’s commitment to exploring the current state of academic honesty, we were awarded an Instructional Technology grant to pilot an online plagiarism detection service in our English Department to test its effectiveness in deterring student plagiarism and to gauge student and faculty reaction to such a service during the 2005-2006 academic year.

While we had good reasons for setting out on this mission and a good structure for the study itself—piloting the system in the English department on a voluntary basis for one year, surveying students and instructors at the start and close of each semester—the

information we gleaned from the project strayed far from the kinds of conclusions we sought. What happened next was a surprise to us and offers insight into the complex and multifaceted conundrum presented by academic dishonesty in general and online plagiarism detection services specifically. In considering what recommendations to make for our university, we had to account for the divergent views between and among the chief stakeholders involved: students and faculty. Without buy-in from both groups, the technology would only exacerbate the sensitivities surrounding the problem. Taking all of these perspectives into account, we did not recommend that our department or our university subscribe to the service on a larger scale. Instead, we recommend efforts to make changes in the larger university culture to strengthen the value given to academic honesty. For those who do plan to incorporate online plagiarism detection services into their larger-scale efforts to enhance academic honesty, we recommend practices that will minimize the not-insignificant drawbacks to the technology and, we hope, maximize its potential for encouraging and helping students to understand academic integrity.

### **Launching Our Study**

We contracted with the leading online plagiarism detection system to provide services for 1,000 students per semester, which we thought would be sufficient for an entirely voluntary pilot project. Before we began, we also decided that while we would advertise the service, including the grade book and peer review package, through flyers, email, and announcements in department meetings, we would not actively recruit or push the program, since one component we set out to measure was faculty buy-in. We offered faculty members both group and one-on-one training sessions. All of these efforts in the fall semester brought a handful of instructors on board; the spring semester saw only 14 out of 60 faculty members subscribe for their classes (involving approximately 350 students). Usage even within the classes of these faculty members was sporadic.

This response was quite a disappointment and left us with too small a sample to draw sweeping conclusions about the effectiveness of online plagiarism detection in our classes. It did, however, offer us plenty of information about practical and ethical reasons that our university's technology dollars might be better spent elsewhere, barring some significant changes. While online plagiarism detection has been shown to decrease cut-and-paste plagiarism when used consistently over several semesters (Martin, 2005), we found that its success is dependent upon the larger academic atmosphere in which it is used.

David F. Martin (2005) of Murray State University recently conducted a five-semester test of an online plagiarism detection service with graduate classes, comparing each semester's work to the previous semesters. His data showed significant decrease from the first, leading him to posit, "Students who plagiarize less are more likely to develop the skills needed to complete their writing and research skills" and are "more likely to become involved in the learning process and may have a greater propensity to develop morally compared with students who avoid becoming involved in the process" (p. 152). It is important to note that Martin's results speak to an ideal context for addressing academic honesty, one in which "the learning process" is privileged and the focus is on

developing both skills and moral strengths. Because online plagiarism detection systems can be used in less conscientious ways, we cannot be sure that these results would recur with wide-scale adoption of the technology.

From our own experience, we can attest that our plagiarism rate dropped from three to four papers per semester containing significant plagiarism (that we were able to detect through traditional means) to zero. However, the ethical issues that arise—issues of privacy, ownership, and profit from student work—complicate even further the question of whether or not the solution is worse than the disease. Perhaps the best outcome from this pilot program is the serious conversations it has prompted among students, faculty, and administrators. Some interest has even been expressed in the creation of a site-based detection program on our campus, a move that would bring online plagiarism detection out of the for-profit sphere, eliminate many concerns about privacy, and align plagiarism prevention more closely with our students' other campus and classroom experiences. The resources necessary to bring site-based plagiarism detection into being seem prohibitive at the moment, though, so we are left to struggle with our concerns about plagiarism detection from an external vendor.

### **Results: A Stakeholder Analysis**

In the course of our project, we collected responses from participating students and faculty reflecting on their experiences with the service. We also held innumerable conversations with colleagues and students over the course of the past year, including a particularly rousing class debate with a senior seminar in Intellectual Property. The unifying theme of all of this feedback has been that there is no unity at all: no two people seem to see the service and its impact in exactly the same way—including the two of us.

Patterns have clearly emerged, though, so that it is fruitful to consider what each of these groups of stakeholders brings to the discussion. Students tend to share the same sets of reservations and endorsements of the service, and faculty seem to dwell on certain issues in favor or against it. A problem as complex as academic dishonesty will never have a single, instant solution, but we owe it to our institutions—and our students—to investigate thoroughly any legitimate tool for solving even a portion of the problem.

### **Student Opposition to Online Plagiarism Detection**

Last spring, we met with the then-president of our university's student body. Students were talking, he said, about the use of online plagiarism detection in their classes, and he wanted to understand the situation before deciding whether the Student Senate should take a stand regarding the service. His concerns were similar to those we had heard from our own students and the students we surveyed in our project: he was bothered by the notion that online plagiarism detection sends the message that instructors do not trust students, and he resented a private company profiting from his work. We assured him that the technology has not affected the trust between instructors and students: even when plagiarism meant copying from the *World Book Encyclopedia*, instructors were checking up on students. In this respect, online plagiarism detection just means that faculty can

catch up with students in the ease of carrying out this age-old dance. We also agreed, that, yes, a private company profiting from his work is less than ideal, but in light of the millions of texts in its database, the online source detection service is making less than a penny from his writing. Textbook companies, the campus food services monopoly, and any number of other corporate interests have profited far more richly from his education.

At the same time, we acknowledge that our student body president is absolutely right: privately run online plagiarism detection services do indeed profit from students in a way that is new and different from computer companies, paper companies, and other suppliers of campus goods and services: instead of a portion of tuition dollars or fees, these companies are profiting from a portion of each student's education itself, the very work he or she produces on his way to earning a degree. As teachers, we have not had to grapple with this particular ethical dilemma in the past, and we are unprepared to handle it. Further explorations are necessary before we can understand the implications of for-profit corporations offering student work as, some might argue, their sole product. In addition, some students and faculty are genuinely bothered by the shift in the student-teacher dynamic that can be brought about by plagiarism detection services. While we maintain that plagiarism detection services foreground aspects of the student-teacher dynamic that have always been in operation, it is clear that many students and faculty members believe that plagiarism detection services change the relationship between teacher and student in fundamental ways.

Students who resist online plagiarism detection bring up three main issues: profit, trust, and anxiety. Like our student body president, they do not want to offer up their work for someone else's profit, and we certainly understand their reluctance. Some students also perceive an alteration in the student-teacher relationship when online plagiarism detection is used; they feel as though they are under surveillance, as though they are, to quote several of them, "guilty until proven innocent." A third, very common concern centers around student fears that they will inadvertently use sources incorrectly and "get busted" by the system. Most online source detection services do offer a solution to the worries of anxious students: by using the drafting feature, instructors can opt to allow students to upload an assignment and see and correct their own source matches before the assignment is officially handed in. This third student concern, though, is especially of interest to us as teachers, because it reveals just how uncertain students are about the parameters and methods of correct citation. If students felt confident in their abilities to cite sources correctly and scrupulously, this concern would disappear. Whatever our views on online plagiarism detection services, students' fear of being caught inadvertently plagiarizing is a reminder to all of us that we have work to do in clarifying consistent standards and methods for our students in this area.

### **Student Support for Online Plagiarism Detection**

When students speak in favor of online plagiarism detection services, their comments tend to fall into two areas. The first type of praise that online source detection garners from students comes from those who see it as comeuppance for their cheating classmates. Students weary of seeing cut-and-paste plagiarizers come away with higher grades

embrace online source detection and feel vindicated by the highly visible results of the service. Tufts University student Veronica Coopersmith is noted in her campus newspaper as being “glad that people who cheated on lab reports in the past now have to work to earn the grades” (Sawicki, 2005). Other students, perhaps in the same camp as the students made anxious by the service, are glad that the service forces them to be more cautious—and more original. The Penn State University *Daily Collegian* quotes student Kaitlyn Infield as saying, “I don’t plagiarize, but it makes me nervous. Then again, it’ll be nice to know for my own reference that sentences are similar. It probably saves [the professor] a lot of work, too” (Marino, 2005).

### **Faculty Support for Online Plagiarism**

Infield raises a crucial point about online plagiarism detection services: faculty frustration and workloads may account for much of the substantial increase in the services’ subscriber base in recent years (Marino, 2005). When, as in our case, helping a colleague to investigate a single case of suspected cut-and-paste plagiarism without the assistance of an online detection service requires more than eight hours of searching, printing, highlighting, and collating to document the plagiarism irrefutably, dealing with plagiarism requires much, much more of faculty members than simply looking the other way. According to the *Who’s Who Among American High School Students’ 26th Annual Survey of High Achievers*, “More than nine out of ten students (94%) were not caught when they had cheated and 5% were caught but not punished” (“High,” 2005). It would be tempting to point fingers at instructors for failing to crack down on plagiarism if we did not acknowledge the working conditions that exacerbate this problem: teaching a 4/4 course load can equate to roughly 4,000 pages of student writing per semester if an instructor dictates a four-page minimum. The notion that an individual instructor can consistently monitor and identify potential plagiarism over 4,000 pages in a single academic year is optimistic at best.

For this reason and several others, many faculty members embrace online plagiarism detection wholeheartedly. Since the leading online plagiarism detection service currently boasts over 3,000 university clients, the service must be making many instructors happy (G. Anderson, personal communication, January 16, 2007). Those instructors tend to like the service because it offers consistency, time savings, and classroom tools. While a typical teaching load and class size make checking every paper for cut-and-paste plagiarism impossible by traditional methods, checking only those papers that seem suspicious is ethically problematic in that it treats students inconsistently. Online plagiarism detection allows each assignment and each student to receive exactly the same level of checking. The resulting time savings for overburdened faculty is incalculable. In seconds, an instructor can generate reports on an entire class. Because handling academic dishonesty is such a labor-intensive process for faculty, this technology can shave precious hours off of at least the initial stages of the process. In addition, the visual representation of highlighted and linked text offers instructors “a tool for educating students on illegal academic practices” and an opportunity to explain unintentional plagiarism (Marino, 2005). Our own instructors also appreciated the convenience of the

platform for online grading, the helpful comments function, and the rubrics provided by the service.

### **Faculty Opposition to Online Source Detection**

However, for every instructor who appreciates online plagiarism detection services, there seems to be another who strongly opposes them. Faculty who voice concerns about the use of online plagiarism detection services bring up a litany of complaints, ranging from the pedagogical and ethical to the technological. Some of these complaints can be answered or remedied easily, but others point to larger issues that complicate the decision to adopt the technology. First and foremost, instructors voice concerns about the legality of the service. They wonder whether for-profit educational use is actually covered under fair use statutes, as the commercial services claim. In addition, they question whether it is legal to, in the words of one instructor who strongly opposed the use of the service, “require our students to surrender ownership of even a fingerprinted version of their work. These concerns are echoed by those who see it as a violation of students’ privacy rights to upload their writing to a database that will access it for an unknowable amount of time. In addition, students in our Intellectual Property class felt that online plagiarism detection services obscure the distinction between plagiarism and piracy, creating another legal gray area.

The leading online plagiarism detection service responds to these concerns in its materials, reassuring users that its lawyers have carefully vetted the process and found its practices to be covered by existing copyright and fair use legislation (“Copyright,” 2006). However, this extension of fair use principles was never considered when the legislation was passed, so we can certainly foresee the potential for legal battles over the service. It is an area in which laws have not caught up with technology, making it perfectly legal for the time being, but subject to possible restriction in the future. Because of this discrepancy, using online plagiarism detection involves taking a tacit stand on the limits of fair use principles, a stand that may be contradicted by future legislation.

Ethical concerns voiced by faculty sometimes echo the legal concerns. Even if it isn’t specifically illegal to require students to surrender a fingerprinted version of their work, it is in some eyes clearly unethical (Purdy, 2005, p. 279). Instructors may also agree with students that the service erodes the “environments of mutual trust and commitment to inquiry” that ideally exist in our classrooms, as one faculty member asserted. Related pedagogical issues include the inarguable notion that instructors are better able to judge and teach academic integrity than a computer, so according to this view, the service detracts from our mission as teachers. Representing this view is the Penn State faculty member who argues that these services “take away a certain level of the personal relationship between teacher and student” (Marino, 2005).

Some problems faculty members have with online plagiarism detection are less complex and more easily remedied. One of our instructors ran into a major technological glitch when the service we used turnitin.com was unable to save her settings correctly because it could not support the older Macintosh version of Explorer she was using. The glitch



inspired her to create the online plagiarism detection service “Wall of Shame” on one of our hallway walls, on which she displayed the many frantic emails from her students as they struggled to complete their assignment. As we were working to create faculty buy-in of the technology for our study, the online plagiarism detection service “Wall of Shame” did not exactly win us any volunteers. For the technology to work consistently and reliably, all users must have access to updated technological resources, so online plagiarism detection costs more than the subscription price. For many institutions, the necessary technological upgrades to give all users appropriate access may be an unpleasant surprise.

Frustration with online plagiarism detection services is also expressed by faculty who questioned the service’s reliability. Because the service does not detect outright fabrication and often lists matches like “United States of America,” these instructors felt that it was less useful. We found that with practice, we could sift through the extraneous matches and find the substantive problems very quickly, so this was a minor irritation. The failure to detect outright fabrication hardly seems to condemn the technology; on the contrary, the engineers at the online source detection service could find far more lucrative venues than this for a technology that could detect lies in written documents.

Other rejections of the service came from faculty members who felt that they did not need the service at all or did not want to see what the service might show them. Some faculty members contend that they do not have a problem with plagiarism in their courses. After reviewing the literature on academic dishonesty on college campuses and reading our own survey responses, we can only hope that these instructors are very lucky exceptions to what seems to be the prevailing trend in higher education. In addition, some faculty members resist the “bad guy” role that would be thrust upon them if they had clear evidence of academic dishonesty. Not wanting to upset the precarious communities they have built in their classrooms, they prefer to presume integrity on all sides.

In addition to the resistance to online plagiarism detection services we found among our own faculty, it is significant that professional groups, such as the Intellectual Property Caucus of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC-IP), have issued statements that delineate the ways in which online plagiarism detection services “compromise academic integrity” (2006). The “CCCC-IP Caucus Recommendations Regarding Academic Integrity and the Use of Plagiarism Detection Services” points to five issues in particular: the imbalance of power under which students are coerced to submit their work, the presumption of guilt and its effect upon students, the potential for fostering a “hostile environment” when students do not want to participate, the dependence upon computers over human instructors for making these critical distinctions, and the violation of student privacy (2006). Statements like this one are essential to our profession’s task of determining the value and place of this new technology.

### **Recommendations for Using Online Plagiarism Detection Systems**

Among those who do choose to use online plagiarism detection systems in their classes, we found that the instructors who are happiest with the service are those who take

advantage of its full capacity as a course management system. Systems that offer rubrics, peer review capability, and grade book functions can become an integral part of a course, so that students see online plagiarism detection as just one of the site's many course functions, as opposed to a process conspicuously separate from the rest of their class activities. Ideally, academic integrity concerns can be just that for all of us: a single issue integrated into our job's many concerns, as opposed to a process conspicuously separate from the rest of our teaching activities. If and when academic integrity is woven into the fabric of our universities' cultures, online source detection services will have to peddle their wares based on their classroom management modules, because we won't need their help so desperately in fighting plagiarism and teaching students how to manage sources. Until then, though, we don't have a better answer. In the meantime, using online detection services thoughtfully and responsibly can alleviate some of their inherent problems and protect the atmosphere of mutual respect and inquiry in our classrooms.

To this end, based upon the results of our study, we offer the following recommendations for those who are considering the adoption of an online plagiarism detection program or who are addressing academic dishonesty on a campus-wide level. To address academic dishonesty on a campus-wide level:

1. Make sure that you have top-level support. Endorsement by senior-level faculty as well as administrators is crucial.
2. At the same time, invite student leaders or representatives to be a part of the policy-making process. Buy-in by faculty is important, but without some student buy-in, any new policies will be difficult to implement at the classroom level.
3. Encourage all instructors to include written policies concerning academic honesty on their syllabi and announce them on the first day of class.
4. Encourage your department and institution to develop a unit-wide policy, creating clear guidelines and procedures that incorporate numerous tools, such as your institution's definitions of academic dishonesty, a public policy outlining the consequences of academic dishonesty, straightforward procedures for faculty to follow in cases of academic dishonesty, an honor code, and possibly online plagiarism detection.
5. For campus-wide approaches to academic dishonesty to be effective, and to gauge whether they are effective, they must be applied consistently.

If your institution is integrating online plagiarism detection technologies into your institution's approach to academic integrity, we also make the following recommendations:

1. Provide frequent training sessions for faculty, but be prepared for one-on-one guidance and support well in advance. For spring semester participation, for example, offer plenty of training throughout the fall semester.
2. All computer operating systems must be current in order to run online plagiarism detection programs effectively.

3. Advise all instructors to provide written policies in their syllabi as well as announce the use of an online detection service on the first day of class.
4. Choose the drafting feature to use the process as a teaching tool. Doing so will assuage student fears and offer them visual demonstrations of the concepts involved.
5. As a part of a policy on academic integrity, encourage instructors to discuss the implications of an online detection service and to create policies for students who object to the use of online detection.
6. Make sure that instructors are comfortable using all of the functions of the program so that it maximizes its potential in the classroom.

The best tool for attacking academic dishonesty is and will always be an atmosphere of accountability and responsibility. Fostering such a climate requires a campus-wide effort and the adoption of a student code of ethics. For this reason and some of those mentioned above, we stop short of recommending the use of online plagiarism detection services. We believe that they can be a powerful educational tool when conscientiously used within a larger context of academic integrity, but they introduce ethical (and potentially legal) problems that are too serious to be overlooked. In addition, unless they are thoroughly integrated into an overall course plan, they can be obtrusive and do hold the potential of altering classroom relationships. Because we do not have sufficient answers to these questions, we cannot endorse the use of online plagiarism detection without these major reservations. However, because we also lack sufficient answers to the problem of academic dishonesty, neither can we dismiss online plagiarism detection out of hand. More research in academic dishonesty, from rates and motivations of occurrences to trends and technologies for new approaches, may be our best hope for better understanding, better strategies, and better teaching.

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