Viewpoints & Discussion:

Shadow Scholars and the Rise of the Dissertation Service Industry: Can We Maintain Academic Integrity?

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Abstract

Notable interest was generated when Dave Tomar's book, *The Shadow Scholar: How I Made a Living Helping College Kids Cheat*, was first published. While ghostwriters and paper mills have long been part of the academic landscape, a far more ominous enterprise has appeared that targets master's and doctoral students seeking assistance with their theses and dissertations. This essay proffers a number of questions for consideration about the services these consulting companies are marketing on the Internet to students across the globe. The article illuminates a rising phenomenon and the potential effects on scholarship, faculty, and universities. It will be of interest to anyone interested in the implications for research education.

Index Terms: dissertation consulting; thesis consulting; ghostwriting; shadow scholar; academic fraud; plagiarism; academic integrity; graduate education; research education

1. Introduction

Considerable debate was engendered when an essay appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Berret, 2012) about Tomar's (2012) confessional book on academic ghostwriting. Berret's article propelled a number of conversations about student ethics and the widespread use of technology in cheating. Since then, the practice has taken on a new dimension with the proliferation of companies on the Internet targeting master's and doctoral students. A Google search quickly identifies a plethora that offer dissertation and thesis consulting services. Some are sole proprietors or former academics, but most are limited liability companies with websites touting testimonials from "satisfied" clients. With the rise of this enterprise come new

questions about the academic integrity and originality of the research produced by graduate students.

While some companies promote themselves as student advocates providing a more intense level of assistance (Buck, 2012), others portray the dissertation/thesis chair as someone struggling to accept the student as an equal, which impedes the candidate's timely success (Garger, 2011). As a member of the professoriate, I find this point of view implies the committee is antagonistic to the student rather than being a protector of academic rigor. It diminishes the chair's mentoring, advocacy, and gatekeeping roles which are designed to ensure the student meets the institutional goals and standards for the discipline (Grant & Tomal, 2013). I also think that it fails to recognize the importance of the research process in transforming graduate students into scholars (Fleming-May & Yuro, 2009).

2. Dissertation and Thesis Consulting Services

The services provided by these companies read like a menu to students hungry for assistance with concept papers, problem statements, literature reviews, proposals, instruments, data collection, statistics, data interpretation, and defense preparation. Some offer "coaching" or "time management" services to identify behaviors that interfere with student motivation and productivity (Miller, n.d.). Another frequently advertised service is developmental writing and copyediting (Jensen, 2016). Still other companies tout their proficiency with various statistical software packages (Campbell, n.d.), qualitative (Prinz, 2016) or quantitative (Zeiger, 2016) methods, and expertise in business, education, health sciences, and mathematics (Dissertation Advisors, 2016).

From a faculty perspective, who are the students that use dissertation/thesis consulting services? Many websites are aimed at online universities (Precision Consulting, 2016). A former consultant indicated approximately 40% of clients were from universities like Capella, Walden, Argosy, Grand Canyon, Phoenix, or Northcentral (J. Rendle, personal communication, October 12, 2015). Others' Internet sites proclaim their familiarity with Ivy League institutions such as Columbia, Cornell, and Harvard (Dissertation Editor, 2014).

Why do some graduate students choose to hire a consultant? A review of weblog discussions shows there are a variety of opinions on the subject (Pragma, 2011). Some students see it as acceptable while others do not (Brabham, 2011). When asked why they considered consulting, some cited the lack of availability of their chair (Case, n.d.). Others felt there was a delay in responsiveness due to the shortage of methodology expertise on the committee (Doreen, n.d.). Some complained that a void in their curriculum compelled them to hire a statistician (Academic Research Group, 2014). I find it even more troubling that some students indicated they had been directed by their chairs to hire a consultant (Paramour, 2007).

Given the lack of empirical data, it seems to this writer that the rationale students use for hiring a consultant is anecdotal at best. Tomar (2012) however, suggests that it is logical when viewed from a generational context. For many students in the millennial generation, knowledge is a readily available commodity that can be easily purchased. He says the accessibility created by the Internet makes cheating even more palatable. Millennials feel entitled to certain outcomes that require some behaviors traditionally viewed as unethical. This sentiment is echoed in Frett's (2010) report that according to the Pew Research Center, the Generation Y cohort is the

only one not to cite work ethic as a desired characteristic. If accurate, I think these findings are troubling and support the need for more research on the topic.

3. Accountability

The information I gleaned from the Internet shows there is limited accountability for dissertation/thesis consultants other than state and local business requirements. This is concerning because some graduate students use student loan proceeds to pay for these services. The companies appear to be answerable only to the client's satisfaction with the service. One website offers an interesting twist on this concept by suggesting they provide "some source of external accountability" that will improve "motivation and self-discipline" (Miller, 2007, para. 1). What is noticeably missing is information about the firm's quality control other than having consultants with doctorates in a wide variety of areas of expertise (Dissertation Genius, 2015).

While many of my colleagues and students may view it as plagiarism or collusion, dissertation consulting is not illegal in the United States and some academics have turned to it as an alternative to unemployment (Delaney, 2012). Tomar (2012) reports that some companies will inflate accomplishments by claiming to have employed PhDs and retired professors. Without any credentialing requirements for the consultants or meaningful accountability for the industry, I do not see how the fidelity of these claims can be independently substantiated. The absence of a regulatory environment has allowed the phenomenon to flourish in the United States.

4. Global Scope

The phenomenon is growing internationally with sophisticated global web-based operations. A recent investigation by *The Australian* discovered that academic ghostwriting was a "vibrant international black market capitalizing on the growing higher education market" (Loussikian, 2015, para. 3). Loussikian found that after a student requested an academic paper online, the order was distributed to freelance ghostwriters around the world. While looking into ghostwriting allegations at the University of Sydney, Australian higher education officials had to request the assistance of officials from the Chinese Ministry of Education.

This author was surprised to learn that text-matching software like *Turnitin* is of little help in this type of case. It was only after a syntax analysis of the suspect papers that the Australian officials were able to determine the ghostwriters were likely of Indian or Pakistani descent (Loussikian, 2015). There are more than 300 websites available to students across the globe that market their services to anyone needing assistance with essays, examinations, master's theses, and doctoral dissertations (Tomar, n.d.).

5. Impact

Sadly, I found that there is a dearth of literature about the effect these services have on student learning, scholarship, or the impact on the institution. The academic integrity of the master's thesis and doctoral dissertation has traditionally been the cornerstone of graduate education. Anything that compromises or devalues the experience resonates across the educational pipeline. All work derived from a third party must be scrutinized to ensure there is no adverse influence on scholarship. If this trend continues, institutions will ultimately have to dedicate

more time to monitoring the academic integrity of the dissertation process (Gibelman & Gelman, 2002; Ison, 2015).

The assistance a student receives can be as benign as seeking another perspective or as flagrant as submitting an entire document that he or she did not write. Since the dissertation or thesis committee has no way of knowing how much help, if any, the graduate student is receiving from the consulting company, they must dedicate more time and resources to ensuring the integrity of the research process. While one company's website explicitly states they will not write the dissertation or thesis (The Dissertation Coach, n.d.) others are more ambiguous. In fact some students report they have received quotes upward of USD 3,000 per chapter to be written entirely (123Dissertations.com, n.d.; The Returning Researcher, 2012).

6. Implications for Academic Integrity

University faculty are familiar with the consequences of plagiarism. These are well documented, including damage to the academic and professional reputation of the offender (Campbell, 2006). We know that, if ignored, it will adversely affect the reputation of the graduate program and the degree-granting institution (Lederman, 2006; Mertz, 2010). Honig and Bedi (2012) recommend a system of monitoring and censure to ensure it is not taken lightly. They stress that respect for the research process and intellectual property of others must be instilled early and practiced daily.

There are significant repercussions when a student submits the work of others under the guise of original research. Aside from the university's credibility, plagiarism in graduate level research is serious scientific misconduct and tantamount to stealing. According to Helgesson and Eriksson (2015), plagiarism occurs when, "using someone else's intellectual property (such as texts, ideas, or results) . . . implying that it is their own" (p. 1). By claiming authorship of the thesis or dissertation, the degree can be characterized as received on the basis of academic fraud. Sanctioning external help as anything other than plagiarism sets a dangerous precedent for later career patterns of similar unethical behavior (Dalton, 2006).

7. Obligations for Disclosure

Since most universities have academic integrity policies, what are the graduate student's responsibilities when hiring a consultant? Is there an obligation to first obtain the approval of the chair and committee? What safeguards are in place to ensure the integrity of the process and originality of the research? How do the chair and committee determine the extent to which the consultant contributed to the dissertation?

What are the institution's policies regarding graduate students hiring consultants? How are they monitored and enforced? One online university requires advance notification when students hire an outside party and uses the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to review this type of case (K. Jackson, personal communication, August 23, 2015). Regardless of the absence or presence of any policies, they are for naught if graduate students do not inform their chair and committee, which is all too often the case. According to former consultants, most clients do not notify their committees (L. Spirko, personal communication, June 4, 2015). This is further complicated by company websites that advertise confidentiality to ensure the anonymity of their clients (Precision Consulting, 2016; The Dissertation Coach, n.d.).

8. Final Thoughts and Discussion Points

Some consulting companies believe they are products of a failure of function in academia (The Returning Researcher, 2012). They posit the lack of structure in graduate programs and inadequate training in conducting independent research compel students to seek the service of consultants. They downplay the notion of originality and dismiss the importance of the quotidian tensions and transformational experiences that occur when engaged in independent research (Heiman, 1997). I find this to be self-serving because as for-profit entities, their motivation is not entirely altruistic. It is easy to see why this is the case with the proliferation of doctoral programs that admit students void of the academic skills needed to conduct independent research (Tomar, 2012).

From an academic perspective, I advance that we should not lose sight that as the cornerstone for scholarship, graduate education prepares the student for the rigors of research and arduous process of promotion and tenure were they to work in academia. This forms the groundwork for a successful scientific or academic career. If the propagation of the dissertation/thesis consulting enterprise continues, I suggest that it will have significant implications for students, faculty, and universities. While the impact on scholarship is yet to be determined, it is clear that the originality of research will become increasingly suspect as more graduate students turn to these companies for assistance.

In closing, it was the author's intent to raise awareness of the aforementioned phenomenon and initiate a dialogue on how we can maintain the integrity of research education. To that end, while not exhaustive, the following questions are presented for deliberation:

Q1. What is the reader's experience with thesis/dissertation consultants, coaches, or ghostwriters?

Q2. What are the experiences of graduate students or faculty who were once clients and used these services?

Q3. What steps (if any) do graduate programs take to ensure the academic integrity of their theses and dissertations?

Q4. Given the limitations of text-matching software like *Turnitin*, what other institutional measures are in place (if any)?

Q5. What programs and/or institutions advocate the use of thesis/dissertation consulting services for their graduate students and how do they insure the integrity of the process?

Q6. What are the practices of research educators to ensure the originality of graduate student research?

Q7. Lastly, what are the editorial policies and practices of academic and professional journals? Since many graduate students go on to become university faculty, it is not a big leap to assume they might hire a ghostwriter to produce a manuscript for publication, particularly if they used one for their dissertation.

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