

A Degree is Worth a Thousand Words: Examining Plagiarism in College

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College degrees are valuable and receiving one can create opportunities for better pay and greater recognition. Earning the degree, however, requires hours of hard work and sacrifice, and a student must complete numerous assignments for each class they take in pursuit of their degree. Unfortunately, to finish an assignment and make it through, some students claim another's work as their own. Whether intentionally or by mistake, plagiarism occurs at many institutions of higher education. Students and institutions have differing viewpoints on plagiarism, so it is necessary to examine its moral status by utilizing two ethical theories. Both Social Contract Theory and Utilitarianism would evaluate intentional plagiarism as immoral; however, their views both have weaknesses that will be explored. In the following paragraphs, the definition of plagiarism will be explained, and the popular views from both students and the institutions will be shared. Next, plagiarism will be evaluated by a Social Contract Theorist and a Utilitarian. Finally, two objections to the evaluation will be explored.

At Laredo College, plagiarism is a form of scholastic dishonesty. The Spring 2022 General Course Syllabus defines plagiarism as "the appropriating, buying, receiving as a gift, or obtaining by any means another's work and the unacknowledged submission or incorporation of it in one's own written work" (Ramos, 2022). In other words, when a student uses another's idea in an assignment and fails to cite it or copies another's work and submits it as their own, they are committing plagiarism. Two scenarios occur which can be explored ethically. One: a student commits plagiarism by mistake because they are not aware of the proper way to cite a source or that they need to cite at all. Two, a student may commit plagiarism intentionally.

The first scenario within colleges and universities is that a student plagiarizes another's work because they were uninformed about the appropriate course of action as they work on a course assignment. According to a 2014 survey of Australian students, only about half of the participants had read their institution's plagiarism policy (Gullifer & Tyson, 2014). That means that the other fifty percent of the students who completed the survey were unaware of their school's definition of plagiarism or how it was handled. At Laredo College, while instructors distribute the course syllabus at the beginning of the semester, it is not guaranteed that students will read the syllabus or fully understand the policy. Therefore, students may commit plagiarism because they do not know how to cite a source properly or do not know that they must do so.

The other situation that occurs is when a student intentionally commits plagiarism. Some factors that may contribute to a student's motives are "time constraints and a heavy workload, along with the desire to achieve a given task" (Fatima et al., 2019). For instance, a student may be overwhelmed with their classwork, especially if they are also working full-time while taking classes. They may turn to plagiarism to help them complete an assignment quickly so they can focus on other items that are due at the same time. At Laredo College, the instructor evaluates any suspected plagiarism and then escalates it through the student disciplinary chain (Ramos, 2022).

Two main perspectives can be explored concerning plagiarism: the students' view and the institution's stance. To start with, it is crucial to understand how students see plagiarism at college. An open-ended questionnaire was given to students at an online university in Pakistan; among the most common responses were that plagiarism takes place due to lack of interest in

course topics, low self-esteem, anxiety over grades, and inadequate management of time (Malik et al., 2021). The students provided a variety of scenarios where plagiarism might be committed, from looking for shortcuts because they had procrastinated or were uninterested in the assignment to fear of failure and lack of confidence in their writing ability (Malik et al., 2021). Students suggested that promoting awareness and providing writing support could help to reduce plagiarism.

The next perspective to observe is that of the college or university. At Laredo College (LC), plagiarism is severely frowned upon, as stated in the scholastic dishonesty policy. This information, as previously mentioned, is included in the Code of Student Conduct & Discipline, which is shared with students as part of the course syllabus and included in the catalog that is published on the LC website each academic year. Institutions of higher education throughout the United States commonly hold the perspective that plagiarism is a violation of policies.

Now that both the student and institution views have been explored, the next step is to look through the lens of two ethical theories. How would student plagiarism be seen by a Social Contract Theorist or a follower of Utilitarianism? First, it is necessary to define the Social Contract Theory. According to author Ya-Yun (Sherry) Kao, “[t]he basic idea of social contract theory in ethics is that ethical rules are sets of conventionally established limits,” and “living together in a society requires a set of rules for social cooperation” (2019). In other words, to live together peacefully requires a generally agreed-upon set of rules that everyone must follow. For example, a follower of Social Contract Theory is presented with a case of student plagiarism where the student intentionally used another author’s work in an essay and claimed the idea as their own without giving appropriate credit. Since most colleges and universities

have a clear policy that states that plagiarism is against the rules, a Social Contract Theorist would agree that scholastic dishonesty is wrong according to the social convention.

Equally important, a follower of the ethical theory of Utilitarianism would take a somewhat different approach to develop their perspective on plagiarism. In Utilitarianism, an action on its own is “neither bad nor good; what makes it bad or good is the consequences it produces” (Abumere, 2019). Additionally, Utilitarianism states that an action is morally wrong if it “leads to the reduction of the maximum good” (Abumere, 2019). Therefore, a Utilitarian would have to evaluate the consequences of student plagiarism and how it affects others to determine whether it is ethically wrong. To illustrate, a Utilitarian is presented with the same case as the Social Contract Theorist where the student committed intentional plagiarism on their essay and claimed another’s work as their own. The Utilitarian would consider the consequences of the plagiarism as they pertain to the original author, the institution, and the student.

To begin, the Utilitarian would ask: how does the student’s plagiarism affect the author of the original work? The author deserves to be acknowledged for their original ideas and would be affected negatively because they were not receiving credit for their hard work. Next, what consequences does plagiarism have on the student? Since the plagiarism was intentional, the student is affected negatively because they are robbing themselves of an opportunity to develop higher reasoning and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, they may have the dishonest act on their conscience for a long time afterward. Finally, how does the student’s plagiarism impact the institution? In this scenario, the student’s essay makes its way to the greater academic community, and the media reports the plagiarism. The resulting scandal casts a

negative light, bringing the scholastic integrity of the institution into question, and causing a drop in enrollment. Accordingly, the Utilitarian evaluating the student's plagiarism case would consider all consequences. Since the student's actions negatively affected all parties involved, they would determine that the plagiarism was morally wrong.

Conversely, while both the Social Contract Theorist and the Utilitarian would conclude that the student's act of intentional plagiarism was unethical, two arguments could be presented to the contrary. First, a challenger to the Social Contract Theorist's determination that plagiarism is morally wrong because it is against the rules could say that the institution has a responsibility to inform students of their academic dishonesty policy and just publishing the policy is not enough. The college should also ensure that their students understand the policy and how to adhere to it and cannot expect them to follow a rule that they do not fully comprehend.

In addition, an opponent to the Utilitarian's view that plagiarism is immoral because it has a wide-reaching negative effect on the majority could argue that the student's actions would only be wrong if it affects many people. If no one finds out that the student committed intentional plagiarism, only two people would be affected: the student and the original author. If an act only harms two people, is that enough to be considered unethical by Utilitarian standards? While both Utilitarianism and Social Contract Theory have valid viewpoints on the moral implications of plagiarism, they are not without their weaknesses.

To summarize, student plagiarism is an issue that affects many colleges and universities in the United States. Plagiarism is defined as using another's work as one's own when

completing coursework and can be committed unintentionally or on purpose. Research shows that students have several reasons why they might commit plagiarism, including lack of understanding, laziness, and poor time management (Malik et al., 2021). Whether by accident or otherwise, many institutions view plagiarism as a violation of their policies. If the act of plagiarism were examined by two ethical theories, Social Contract Theory and Utilitarianism, each one would determine that committing plagiarism was immoral. The Social Contract Theorist would say that plagiarism is wrong because it has been determined to be against the rules by the majority. After carefully examining the consequences of the student's actions, the Utilitarian would also evaluate the plagiarism to be unethical because it negatively affected everyone involved. Contrarily, while these are two strong assessments, they are not without flaws. An opponent to the Social Contract Theorist's statement could say that the student's actions cannot be determined to be morally wrong unless the institution has made sure their students fully understand the policies and how to follow them.

Further, a challenger to the Utilitarian's evaluation that plagiarism is immoral because it causes damage to the greater good could argue that such damage would only be caused if the student's actions were brought to light. They would question whether the deed could still be seen as unethical if the act were undiscovered. In short, students are faced with many challenges as they complete their coursework in pursuit of their diplomas. To obtain a valuable college degree, students put in a lot of time and effort and make many sacrifices, and unfortunately, some students commit plagiarism in order to finish. If a student plagiarizes another's work intentionally, are they also sacrificing their dignity, pride, and self-respect by

committing an unethical act? It is worth examining when an invaluable college degree is at stake.

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