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HOMEWORK

Software helps detect plagiarism

Turnitin.com gives instructors an aid in determining which term papers may have been plagiarized.

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Pity the poor professor charged with detecting plagiarism in hundreds of papers, most of which start to sound alike after the first few hours of grading anyway. That third paragraph might seem familiar, but does it represent academic dishonesty or just group think? And, when the rare brilliant observation is made, should an educator be filled with praise or suspicion?

S. Christopher Ellis, an instructor in the College of Business Administration at Florida International University, faced the same dilemma -- until he discovered turnitin.com. Turnitin's software helps detect plagiarism by scanning students' work and searching for matches of six consecutive words. The papers are compared with work turned in by other students in the class; to all documents in the turnitin.com database, which includes thousands of published works; and to documents on the Internet.

In his office at FIU's Ryder Building, Ellis used his laptop to call up a list of students' most recent assignments. After students turn in their papers by uploading them at the turnitin.com website, the company's software lets Ellis see how much of their writing matches other known work by a system of color coding, from blue for few or no matches to red for 80 percent or more matching text.

Ellis quickly noted that the color coding in itself does not detect plagiarism. Most of the student papers were coded green, the second-lowest level, but when Ellis called up the assignments and noted the underlined passages, he discovered that most of them referred to passages in the text assigned for the class. Turnitin.com will flag such passages even if they are properly cited. Conversely, a blue code does not mean a student is a paragon of virtue; it may just mean that he has written such a poor paper that he hasn't cited any other works.

"Here's what turnitin does well: It finds if students have copied from someone else and if they've used outside references. It won't grade the paper," Ellis said. The instructor ``has to make the judgment call: Was it deliberate plagiarism or was it a student being sloppy with citing sources?"

In one case, Ellis said, a student was expelled after she turned in a paper copied verbatim from the instructors' manual for the class, which she had obtained through unauthorized means.

"They say that most crooks aren't very smart, and students who cheat, with the odd exception, aren't very smart, either," Ellis said. ``We harvest the unaware with this software. Typically, they will write their own opening, copy two or three paragraphs from other sources, and write their own ending."

Turnitin has been available to FIU professors since fall 2004. "I have given several presentations and everybody loves it," Ellis said.

Other users in South Florida, according to the company's website, include Miami Dade College and the Florida League of IB Schools.

At Coral Reef High School in Miami-Dade, Michele Patterson, coordinator for the International Baccalaureate program, says that for the past three years, IB students' major papers have been checked for plagiarism using turnitin.com.

IB students, who turn in a research project that is judged by two examiners outside the school, "like the security [turnitin.com] offers," Patterson said, because they believe that it protects them from allegations of plagiarism. "Our approach at the school has always been, 'We're doing this to protect you.'"

Ellis agreed, saying that his students also welcome the scrutiny, believing that students who do their own work have nothing to lose. ``This software levels the playing field, so that everyone can feel better about taking the class."