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Local News

'Cut and paste' essays get delete treatment at UCSB

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By MORGAN GREEN
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Special software can detect material that has been lifted from the Internet

UCSB librarian Sarah Pritchard's first name was incorrect in a Sunday story about plagiarism by college students.

Responding to a dramatic rise in Internet plagiarism, UCSB now has a counter-move: a computerized service that detects students who "copy and paste" the work of others and turn it in as their own.

UCSB's "home-grown" service that professors can sign up for at no cost was unveiled this month after two years of development. The service compares the thousands of homework essays professors receive each term with the information on the vast Internet, and other students' work.

The hope is that the service, called PAIRwise, proves so valuable that all UCSB professors who assign essays will use it, and other colleges pick it up as well.

The problem at UCSB and at many other universities across the country is that Internet cheating is easy for students who have been surfing online since grade school, UCSB officials say. But catching them is a needle-in-a-haystack nightmare for professors and teaching assistants who often grade hundreds of essays at a time under tight deadlines.

There are several plagiarism detection products on the market for a fee, such as the popular Turnitin.com, which scans the Internet and its own collection of student works. But few UCSB professors actually use those services, saying that hundreds of dollars a year in base fees and additional per-student fees put such services out of reach for departments on tight budgets.

Researchers say that cheating overall, from sending in a friend to take your test to peeking at somebody else's answers, has not dramatically increased in decades. Nonetheless, recent studies indicate that roughly half of all college students admit to cheating at some time on written work, and the Internet has become the plagiarists' favorite tool by far.

FIVE-YEAR RISE

The rise in Internet plagiarism started appearing at UCSB in 2000, and has grown so much that it is now the most popular of all forms of cheating, said Joe Navarro, UCSB associate dean of students and of the campus judicial process.

Twenty-four cases of plagiarism came to the campus misconduct committee in 2002-03, and 14 involved the Internet, according to the latest records. Last year, "I'm sure there were more," said Mr. Navarro.

After hearings at which guilt must be proven, one student was expelled, 10 were ordered to leave for two academic quarters -- losing their student aid and housing -- and three were put on disciplinary probation.

The total seems small, considering UCSB has 18,000 or so undergraduates. But, Mr. Navarro said reported cases are only the tip of the iceberg because many are never discovered. Others are not submitted by professors for official discipline -- it's a common practice to quietly flunk the offender instead.

The plagiarism statistics don't surprise students like UCSB junior Lauren Lozano.

"I definitely know people who do it" once a year or so, she said. Cheating is "definitely tempting because it's just that easy."

She confirms an attitude among students that professors say fuels Internet cheating. "I don't think people believe it's morally wrong, or that they're going to lose sleep over it."

Plagiarism patterns at UCSB reflect those around the nation.

Surveys in the past two years involving 68 campuses and more than 40,000 students showed that 36 percent admitted to cut-and-paste Internet plagiarism, said Donald McCabe, a Rutgers University professor and founder of the Center for Academic Integrity. The actual percentage, he said, is surely higher.

Some professors here believe that part of the increase is due to genuine ignorance. The most common student excuse is, "I didn't know," said Mr. Navarro.

IGNORANCE OR EXCUSE?

The experts say many of today's college students don't understand that a cyber-source must be attributed with quotation marks or footnotes just as if it were an old-fashioned encyclopedia. Students have become accustomed to downloading music and movies and sharing with friends, even though such items are usually for sale.

"They haven't absorbed what most of us consider conventional academic morality. So, they take and use without citing," said John Woolley, a UCSB political science professor and faculty adviser to the provost.

The ignorance excuse is wearing thin, however.

"Students are more sensitized than even a year or so ago" because of television programs such as the "60 Minutes" documentary that focused on Internet plagiarism, said Roger Ingham, a UCSB professor in speech and hearing science. "It sent shock waves across the nation."

Indeed, a random sampling of UCSB students indicated many know that using Internet text without attribution is plagiarism. "In my high school classes my teachers stressed not to plagiarize, to source

information," said Christy Flis. "I finished a paper last night, I was overly concerned to cite my sources."

Intentional or accidental, Internet plagiarism is not a problem universities have demonstrated they're well-equipped to correct. Daniel Hu, UCSB teaching assistant in mythology, is like thousands of other graduate students who regularly grade hundreds of essays at a time. He estimates that about four of every 50 he reads contain information without proper citations. But pinning plagiarism down is a cumbersome aggravation.

"If you see a phrase that looks 'above' the student, you have to copy it and paste it. Then you have to do a Google search on the Internet," he said. "It's time consuming, and it makes you feel like a cop."

PAIRwise can change all that, said Bruce Bimber, a political science professor and director of the UCSB Center for Information Technology and Society (CITS). A CITS team invented PAIRwise.

The CITS researchers hope their service will permeate the UCSB campus to catch plagiarists and deter students from plagiarizing in the future. The inventors deliberately made their software free, and transparent, or open source, which means anybody can pick it up and use it. They envision it spreading to other universities which may customize the software to suit their needs.

GOOD ENOUGH FOR STARTERS

Although the PAIRwise service cannot check all potential sources, such as Web sites that require access codes, it's good enough for starters, say the inventors. "Our ultimate goal is that it will take more effort to plagiarize than to just write the paper in the first place," said Kevin Almeroth, CITS associate director and PAIRwise team leader.

PAIRwise is plugged into the university's computer network and can compare essays -- down to partial sentences -- against the Internet and against other essays by students past and present. UCSB librarian Susan Pritchard said she believes PAIRwise will also soon include the 20,000 or so digitized journals in the UC library system, key student reference databases.

After the service scans an essay, it spits out a picture showing the essay side by side with the document, or documents, that were copied. Plagiarized text and its sources are highlighted in glaring red. That report goes to the professor, who decides how to handle matters from there, Mr. Almeroth said.

By this fall, dozens of faculty could be PAIRwise clients. "We'd consider 50 a tremendous success," with more signing up as the service proves itself, he said.

Professors say they are very interested, if PAIRwise lives up to its billing.

"I teach a large class on the American presidency. I have three teaching assistants and 180 students," said Mr. Woolley. The service "has got to be smooth and reliable and easy."

With tight grading deadlines to meet, "the system can't break."

The PAIRwise team is confident, based on pilot studies. A handful of faculty offered their classes as guinea pigs last year using a similar, if less sophisticated, computer service that compares student essays with each other. Scans of 4,000 essays from nine courses turned up eight plagiarism incidents involving 17 students. Participating faculty termed the service "fabulous" and "a blessing," CITS reported.

At least one other institution, Santa Barbara City College, already is eyeing the UCSB service, especially because its creators are offering it for free. "Gosh, it would be great. We'd be very interested," said Jack Friedlander, City College executive vice president "Our faculty do say Internet plagiarism is a growing

problem, so we'd love to have some kind of tool."

City College, with about 16,000 students, is facing much the same problems as UCSB, he said. Tightening state budgets forced the college last year to drop the commercial anti-plagiarism service it had been buying.

Some UCSB students say they would welcome tighter controls on Internet plagiarism, partly to level the academic playing field, but also to ease certain social pressures.

"I'd actually like the idea," said Daniel Vargas, a senior history major. "I know people who have gone through my stuff (at home in Isla Vista). They ask to use it. I always say no, but I feel bad. I'd be glad if I could avoid all of that."

With a campuswide anti-plagiarism check, "why try it?"

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STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Bruce Bimber, right, director of the UCSB Center for Information Technology and Society (CITS), and Kevin Almeroth, CITS associate director, are hoping their service catches on with the entire UCSB campus.

Professors and instructors at UCSB attend a workshop on using the PAIRwise system. The creators hope that it proves so valuable that

all UCSB professors who assign essays will use the service, and other colleges pick it up as well. At least one other institution, Santa Barbara City College, already is eyeing the UCSB program, especially because it is being offered at no charge.

LEN WOOD / NEWS-PRESS

A new UCSB computer service finds plagiarism by comparing student essays to the Internet and other students' work. The system highlights text that has been copied from the original work, at top, to duplicated passages in the student's work, at bottom.