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Staten Island colleges in hi-tech hunt for student cheaters

by FRANK DONNELLY

With the click of a mouse, college students faced with a daunting term paper or take-home test can download a bounty of information from the Internet.

But under deadline pressure, some students resort to “cutting-and-pasting” material from Wikipedia and other Web sources, without making the proper citations.

In the past 16 months, there have been 65 reported allegations of cheating, combined, at two borough colleges. One other school could not provide statistics.

To ferret out plagiarism in a web-based world, Staten Island colleges have increasingly turned to new computer-based tactics. Faculty at St. John’s University, Grymes Hill, and at the College of Staten Island are tapping into plagiarism-detecting software to evaluate students’ written work and identify possible cases of cheating.

Wagner College in Grymes Hill, doesn’t use such programs yet, but the school is considering doing so, said Dr. Horst Onken, associate professor of Zoology and Physiology and chairman of the school’s Academic Honesty Committee.

But that doesn’t mean faculty isn’t closely checking students’ papers, he said. Many professors evaluate passages of students’ work on Google to determine if it’s original, he said.

“It certainly makes sense to me that cases of plagiarism become more numerous with the increasing availability and ease of access of online resources,” said Dr. Onken, who also directs Wagner’s honors program. “Every college is concerned about it. If you use a source, that is the work of somebody else ... [and] proper citation is a requirement. In my opinion, it is the responsibility of the academic community to instruct students about the proper use of such sources.”

Over the past 10 years, the Academic Honesty Committee has received 28 allegations of cheating on average, annually, said Dr. Onken. The high was 46 cases in the 2003-04 school year, he said. There were 34 reported incidents in the 2010-11 year, said Dr. Onken. Most allegations involve plagiarism, he said.

Incidents reported to the Academic Honesty Committee don’t include other alleged incidents of cheating which professors, who have the option to do so, handle themselves, said Dr. Onken. There is no record of the number of incidents handled in-class, he said.

“It’s a very common problem at any institution,” said Dr. Deborah Vess, associate provost for undergraduate studies and academic programs at the College of Staten Island, Willowbrook.

There were 31 reported incidents of cheating at the school for the current calendar year, said Kenneth Bach, a CSI spokesman.

Dr. Vess said she hasn’t detected any discernible trend over the years in cheating or plagiarism at CSI.

HONESTY CODES

But, according to a recent Pew Research Center study, 55 percent of college presidents surveyed say plagiarism has risen in students' papers over the past decade. About 40 percent said that plagiarism has remained the same.

Of those who said plagiarism has increased, 89 percent believe computers and the Internet have played a major role in that trend, said the survey.

Dr. Miguel Roig, a psychology professor at St. John's University, Grymes Hill, said incidents of "cut-and-paste" plagiarism have spiked.

In such cases, students download whole passages from Internet sources, such as Wikipedia and other websites and insert them into their papers without citing the information as someone else's work. Or they'll make minor alterations, believing they can submit the information as their own.

"Many students [incorrectly] think changing a word here or there is acceptable," said Dr. Roig. "The world's knowledge is at our fingertips with the Internet, but students need to learn the proper rules of scholarship. Can they analyze and synthesize" what they've researched?

Dr. Roig couldn't provide statistics on alleged cheating incidents at St. John's.

All three Staten Island colleges stress the importance of academic honesty to students from the moment they first walk through their doors.

At Wagner, for example, all students must sign the school honesty code. Professors are also asked to include a statement of honesty for students on all exams and papers, said Dr. Onken.

Students who cheat potentially face failing marks or, in repeat cases, possible expulsion, from the Island's colleges.

At Wagner College, for instance, cases of minor plagiarism, in which only a sentence or two of material has been lifted, typically result in an "F" on the paper, Dr. Onken said. Cases of major plagiarism in which significant amounts of material have been cut and pasted earn students an "F" for the course, he said.

In addition, first-time offenders must complete a tutorial on academic honesty within one semester, according to Wagner's Student Academic Honesty & Integrity Handbook.

Second-time offenders normally flunk the course and are suspended for one semester, the handbook states. The typical sanction for a third offense is failure for the course and expulsion.

OVERWHELMED FRESHMEN

Dr. Onken at Wagner said the "vast majority" of students accused of cheating there are freshmen.

"Then, it goes steeply down" among sophomore and upper classmen, he said, which indicates the school's academic-honesty policies are sinking in.

Freshmen might be more prone to cheat or plagiarize for a variety of reasons, academics say. Their college curriculum is typically more rigorous than high school, or they haven't grasped the rules for citing sources.

Many simply get overwhelmed or wait until the last minute to compose their papers.

"It's not that those students don't know what plagiarism is, but they have very bad time management," said Dr. Onken.

Dr. Roig at St. John's agreed.

"Procrastination is very often the reason for cheating and plagiarism," he said.

Others may be testing limits.

“Freshmen are definitely in a new environment. Maybe to some extent, it’s like checking things out. ‘Can I get away with that?’” said Dr. Onken.

Dr. Roig said he reviews students’ work with Turnitin -- computer software designed to detect plagiarism in papers.

“That’s a godsend,” he said.

Dr. Vess and Dr. Susan Holak, CSI’s associate provost for institutional effectiveness said the school offers training and workshops with anti-plagiarism programs for faculty and students.

“We need to produce students who are critical and independent thinkers,” said Dr. Vess. “There’s a need to learn to integrate other people’s ideas and also include your own perceptions.”

Besides checking Google, Dr. Onken will compare a student’s paper to his or her previous writings. A noticeable difference sends up a red flag.

And while students sometimes go astray, educators say the Web remains a valuable tool.

“I’m a big supporter of the Internet,” Dr. Onken said. “It’s like a vast dictionary and collection of sources. The problem is that these sources are so accessible, and it’s a challenge to use them and correctly cite them.”