

**Graduate Honor System
Case Summary S20XX-02**

Mr. Clark, a graduate student in Grad Studies, has been referred of plagiarizing on a term paper in course # GRAD 5999. Specifically, it is alleged that Mr. Clark copied sections of his paper from online sources without the use of quotation marks or citations. The case was referred to the honor system by the professor of the course, Dr. Joe Referrer.

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Graduate Honor System Investigation

S20XX-02

Interview with Professor: Dr. Joe Referrer

Date: March 2, 20XX

1. Dr. Referrer, could you tell me a little more about your relationship with this student?

Mr. Clark is an advisee whom I had the opportunity to teach this Spring. He is a bright and talented student. However, when confronted with problems with his work instead of taking the time to reflect and learn from his mistakes, he seems to be more focused on smoothing things over and getting a good grade. He wants to do well in school but he seems to lack the professional integrity that is extremely important in this field. Also, I am concerned about his writing ability. His writing skills are not as strong as they need to be in order to ensure success in the field of urban and regional planning.

2. What do you think is most important for me to understand about your initial report?

The key issue is the cut and paste copying. I can accept some minor bit of misunderstanding regarding paraphrasing and the formatting of citations and references. It is the obvious copying of several paragraphs that led me to report this to the Graduate Honor System, even though I wish I hadn't had to.

3. Outside of the syllabus were there any exchanges between the class and you about the honor system and plagiarism?

I did not have any additional exchanges with the students about plagiarism. But I thought I made it very clear in the syllabus. When I went over the syllabus I told the students that I was strongly against plagiarism, and if a student was struggling he or she should come and see me. I told the students that there was no acceptable reason to plagiarize.

4. Could you tell me a little more about the nature of this assignment?

The point of the assignment was to develop a literature review for a student's thesis. It was meant as an opportunity for me to give students in depth feedback on their literature review that they don't often get once they start writing their thesis.

Students had to chose from one of two options – an in depth review on a specific topic or three shorter papers. Mr. Clark chose to do the in depth review. For this assignment students were to turn in a draft, and then the final version of the paper.

I regret allowing Mr. Clark to do the in depth review instead of the three shorter papers. However by the time it became apparent to me that he was struggling with this assignment, he had already missed two of the deadlines for turning in the shorter papers. I suggested that he go to the writing center, but I should have been more insistent. I wish he had asked for extra time, then I could have pulled the reigns harder and maybe avoid this situation all together.

5. Were the students given specific instructions for citing?

In all fairness, instructions about how to cite or which citation style to use are not in the syllabus. Since urban and regional planning does allow course instructors to select which method, I encourage students to use APA style, as it matches our field best.

6. Could you tell me how citations work using the APA format?

Like most other citing styles, APA requires the use of quotations if you use direct quotes of multiple words. This style requires citations for quotes, as well as for paraphrased sections, and the listing of all references cited in a reference list.

7. In your report you stated that you spoke to the student about his citations when he turned in his draft ...could you tell me a little more about that?

The purpose of the draft was to get an idea of what the student was going to be doing for his paper, and provide initial feedback. I noticed that a few sentences looked familiar to me but Mr. Clark assured me that these were his personal notes from references. I reminded him that he had to write the paper not simply regurgitate notes from sources, and that he had to follow APA style. I was not concerned as I believed that the final paper would not include these “notes”. In retrospect, I do wish that I had warned him some more. I simply just took him saying they were his notes at face value.

8. Do you have any plausible explanation as to why this student’s work appeared the way it did?

He could have honestly not known. He told me he did not understand what the rules were, nor did he understand that copying word for word was not acceptable.

Another explanation could simply be his educational background before coming to Virginia Tech. Mr. Clark’s undergraduate program is known for not paying attention to plagiarism. Many students who have come from this particular institution do not know that plagiarism is not OK. They seem to learn by repeating what they are taught. These students are always surprised when I tell them that this [plagiarism] is not done, and that it is wrong.

A third reason could be simply that he got to the end of the semester and found himself with so much to do that he decided to splice together pieces from his references to get his work done.

Any of these options is a feasible explanation.

9. Is there anything that you would like to add to your initial report?

The paper Mr. Clark turned in was in actuality a failing paper. It was copied, patched and spliced together in such away that it did not make sense. Instead of putting him in a position where he felt he was being given an arbitrary “F”, I thought this would provide the ideal setting for us to sit down and have a conversation about what plagiarism is and why giving credit to authors for their work is important for professional development.

I anguished over whether to report this to the honor system or to simply give him a failing grade for the assignment. I decided to report it because effective communication and professional integrity are both very important aspects of the field. Working with the public requires integrity. A piece of work like the one Mr. Clark turned in to me could have gotten his organization sued or could have cost him his job in a real world situation.

I don't want this to be about Mr. Clark and me. I want a formalized framework in which there are people saying "You cannot copy. And here is why you cannot copy". I would love to see him take some of those classes on plagiarism, and I would love to see him write the paper in his own words. It will not be easy but I want Mr. Clark to understand the value of taking your own intellectual perspective on work so that he can be successful when he leaves Virginia Tech.

Mr. Clark has a lot of talent and he has great people skills. I wish I had seen this coming so that I could have done something before it had to get to this stage. I don't want this to be a punitive process for Mr. Clark. I want it to be a learning process.

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No.

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Interview with Referred Student: Mr. Clark

Date: March 7, 20XX

1. Did you receive a letter from the chair of the Graduate Honor System?

Yes I did.

2. Do you mind answering a few questions for me?

No I do not mind answering questions for you.

3. Do you understand your rights in this situation?

Yes.

4. How long have you been at Virginia Tech?

This is my second semester here. I have been here about a year.

5. Do you understand the charges being brought against you?

I understand that I am here because I supposedly plagiarized on my term paper but I am not sure what I have done exactly. [The associate chair explains that it is alleged that there are sections of the student's paper that were identical to the work of others that were presented without citations or quotations].

6. Do you understand these charges?

Yes.

7. Could you explain to me your understanding of the incident?

I am not from a research background. Before coming to Virginia Tech I had only written technical reports that provided results of health and welfare inspections. Before coming to Virginia Tech I never had to write a paper that required references and citations.

Now after this situation with Dr. Referrer I have improved. I learned about plagiarism and citations and I wrote a paper recently where I cited everything. I was ignorant. I did not know how to cite. I knew plagiarism existed but I thought that as long as I put my references in a list at the end of the paper I would be alright. For my paper I cited using a rough format because I did not know what else to do. I thought it was OK. I thought it was correct. But now I know that it was not.

8. There were sections of your paper that were identical to sections of papers from online sources, could you explain this to me?

As I said before it was ignorance. I really didn't know. I cited using a rough format that I thought was correct. I have never had to write such sorts of papers before, and I have never been in this sort of situation before. I have always been a good student with no negative marks on my record. This was not intentional.

Since it was a term paper I thought it was ok to take information from the source and just list the source in the reference list. I thought doing so would serve the purpose of citations and references for my paper. This is very different from what I had to do in my undergrad.

If I had to copy intentionally I would have molded and twisted the words so as to cover my actions. I thought it was OK to use sources as long as those sources that served as roots for the topic I was examining. I did not know that what I was doing was wrong.

9. What is your viewpoint on the direct copying of entire paragraphs?

I never tried to say that this was my own work. This was a literature review, not a patent application or creative writing – my job was to present the best information. I thought it was understood that these weren't my ideas.

It's true that the professor wanted us to use our own words, but my paper was still so incomplete and I was running out of time. I decided the only way to get done was to include such passages of material directly. I didn't use quotes, because I didn't want the professor to notice what was happening.

10. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

I am hoping it will get resolved quickly. In the mean time, I am also working with Dr. Referrer to revise the paper for my practicum. Since this has never happened to me before, and I have a clean school record to this point, I think I should be given a chance to complete my revisions and turn the paper into Dr. Referrer without any further penalty.

11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No.