

Plagiarism Policy

Scholars at every level must represent truthfully their findings; that is, they must not tamper with the truth as they see it, and they must not offer as theirs what others discovered or wrote. These are the responsibilities of professor, researcher, and student.

Nearly all college students attempt to be honest, but some do not appreciate the extent to which plagiarism is dishonest. It is important to recognize that plagiarism is theft, not of ideas, which are in a sense the property of everyone, but of the credit for originating ideas. Plagiarism is also fraud—intentional deception in order to obtain what does not rightfully belong to one—for students who plagiarize attempt to get from the instructor an unearned grade and from the university an unearned degree. Of course, plagiarists also affront the entire the student body. Plagiarism, finally, is impersonation, since every piece of written work presents an image of its author. Therefore, plagiarism is particularly damaging to the plagiarist; for just as impersonators may get lost among assumed roles, plagiarists will almost certainly have a false understanding of themselves and of the education they are getting.

“Theft,” fraud,” and “impersonation” are harsh words, but they accurately represent the moral status of plagiarism and the severe attitude toward it that prevails. Students who use another’s ideas or language without giving credit violate the most basic agreement between students and the university; they attack the academic enterprise at its heart. If students realize this, they rarely will plagiarize intentionally, unless they are very cynical indeed.

Unfortunately, the proper use of other people’s work is a delicate business, and students sometimes plagiarize without intending to do so. Moreover, education consists almost entirely in the proper use of other people’s ideas, so that what the university asks you to do bear a certain resemblance to what it asks you not to do. Inevitably, and rightly, a large part of what any student can produce comes from books, from instructors, and from other students. Nearly as bad as plagiarism would be a total refusal to be influenced by what other people have written or said. Thus, it is necessary that all students familiarize themselves (if they are not already familiar) with the difference between legitimate and illegitimate borrowings.