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Plagiarism: Not So Simple . . .

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"There's no way he wrote this assignment."

That thought began yet another adventure in academic dishonesty, and although the end product was the same as usual, the process of getting there held a few surprises and forced me to think through several dilemmas I hadn't expected.

This case went from a fairly typical plagiarism incident to a series of deeper questions about athletes, who should be in college, what the academy owes students, and what our role as faculty ought to be.

My first encounter with William was when his adviser asked me to sign his degree plan. I refused, citing the fact that his GPA in the mass communication major was considerably lower than the 3.0 we require before students can enroll in the senior capstone class. When William showed up on the roll the next fall, I had forgotten about the degree-plan incident, but I was quickly reminded when he turned in the first assignment. It read as if a second-grader had written it, complete with the wrong "its," the wrong "there" and several misspellings of simple words. Of the six phrases ending with a period, two were actual sentences, and the content missed the point of the assignment entirely.

Weekly ethics assignments, for which students were required to find something (e.g., an ad, a news article) and comment on how the media handled its ethical obligations, followed the same pattern. These are not difficult assignments—look around, then make a coherent observation. Nonetheless, I could rarely understand what he was trying to say—that is, when he turned in the assignments at all. I asked him several times to see me so we could figure out how he could improve. I began understanding the C's and D's in most of his other mass communication classes, and it seemed clear that our education system had failed him, miserably.

Then came the first grade check from our academic support center, which handles athlete advising and eligibility. I had no idea that a slight, 5-foot-6-inch student could be a football player.

My requests to set up a meeting went nowhere. Do I call academic support? Do I call Coach?

Before I could answer these questions, the election assignment came around. Students had been asked to comment on the media's election coverage. By the third sentence—which, unlike its predecessors, was actually a sentence, made sense, and contained proper grammar and spelling—I knew something was up. The more I read, the more I was convinced it was an AP recap. Phrases like "most notably Delaware" and "impatience with Obama's economic policy" made it only easier for me when I sat down with our friend and enemy, Google.

When a colleague and I are suspicious that a student has plagiarized, we use the code phrase, "I don't have time for this $#@!!" to get confirmation or refutation from each other. Before I could phone my colleague for confirmation, another colleague e-mailed me a heads-up that she was failing a student for lifting sections of his speech straight from the Internet without attribution and that the matter probably would find its way to my office.

I shouted onto Jim's voicemail, "I don't have time for this $#@!!—TWICE!"

When Jim responded, he began reading, then stopped. "'Most notably Delaware?' Yep. Pretty obvious."

It's easy to throw all you've got at the student who has been a problem all semester and shows no recognition of, nor contrition for, plagiarism. But William is a quiet, soft-spoken, polite young man.

I asked him whether he had written the assignment himself, to which he replied that he had. When I showed him the AP recap from the Internet, he told me he had cut/pasted. When I told him this constituted academic dishonesty, he was incredulous. He argued over and over again, in his soft-spoken way, that he didn't mean to cheat, he didn't know that what he did was actually cheating, and that he thought that because it was on the Internet, it was acceptable for him to use it word for word. I told him that as a senior in college, he is responsible for knowing what is and is not acceptable and the "I didn't know" defense would get him nowhere.

Sadly, I believed he did not know he was cheating.

After I told him that I believed him, I told him that what he did, despite all of his statements, still constituted academic dishonesty and that he would fail the course. He appealed to the dean, citing not only all of his prior statements, stressing the "I did not mean to cheat" argument, but adding that being dropped from the course at that point would remove him from what should have been the highlight of his college career, the NCAA football playoffs. My dean was sympathetic but not enough to overrule me.

Coach called to let me know that the team was "weak on defense" and would be even weaker without William, but nonetheless, he supported me.

Now there was no doubt that our education system had failed William. Miserably. But diagnosing what went wrong, when, is a little tougher.

Was he pushed through the system because he was an athlete, coaches intervened, and weak defenses trumped weak academics? Did previous professors, or high school or middle school teachers, ignore the glaring weaknesses in his writing? If so, why? Did they think they were doing him a favor, when now it's clear that their failure to work with him actually hurt him more? Or did they conclude that he was not college material anyway and the only thing he really had going for him was sports, so they might as well allow him to cherish that?

A former colleague used to casually state that some students should not be in college, that they lacked the maturity, the time-management skills, maybe just the brains, maybe all of the above. I still can see him pointing at his head, saying, "Some just don't have it. I know that's cold, but it's the truth."

I concurred in part, at least on maturity and time management, but I wasn't, and still am not, ready to conclude that someone just isn't smart enough. When we spend innumerable hours reading the wrong "you're" . . . and/or fragments masquerading as full sentences . . . and/or essays that make no sense, it is easy to conclude that students like William don't belong in college. And in William's case, I have to admit I thought maybe he wasn't college material more than once.

Then I had to look in the mirror. Am I part of the problem? Maybe I should not be so rigid about these things? Maybe the "I didn't know" defense should allow lesser punishment than the "I did it and don't care" nondefense? Maybe "seniors in college should know" is too idealistic.

But I keep coming back to the idea that the education system failed him. Somehow, somewhere, someone should have seen to it that William could write coherently, using proper mechanics, and that he knew what constitutes plagiarism. It should not have come to the point of a likable athlete crying in my office, flunking a course after committing an error that he truly did not know was an error. It should not have come to the point of arguing that flunking the course will mean losing his eligibility, which will mean the worst punishment of all, not playing.

I still have not sorted it all out, and there are no easy answers. That's not a satisfying way to wrap up this adventure, but it's the most honest.

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