



Assessing Upperclassmen versus Underclassmen Business Student Perceptions of Plagiarism at a Regional Institution of Higher Education

Migyu Li, University of West Alabama

Feng He, University of Central Arkansas

Shimin Lin, University of West Alabama

Shiyng Chen, University of West Alabama

Ziqi Wang, University of West Alabama

Daniel A Doss, University of West Alabama

ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty and cheating are concerns of higher education institutions. This study represents a natural extension of preceding plagiarism research that was performed at a regional institution of higher education. This study examines underclassmen versus upperclassmen perceptions of plagiarism regarding three notions: 1) necessary evil, 2) professionalism, and 3) legality. The findings of this study confirmed the findings of its predecessors in that plagiarism was not viewed as a necessary evil, that respondents exhibited neutrality regarding plagiarism from a professional context, and that neutrality was exhibited regarding the legal perspective. One statistically significant outcome was exhibited regarding professionalism views of plagiarism.

KEYWORDS: academic dishonesty; cheating; education; higher education; plagiarism

The host institution for this study was a rural, regional teaching university

located within the United States of America. More specifically, the host institution served the Black Belt region of Alabama. During this study, its cumulative enrollment was approximately 5,000 students among its various colleges, including both graduate students and undergraduate students. Within its College of Business, the overall enrollment was 312 residential students. This study was constrained to these residential students within the College of Business.

The host institution forged a variety of international agreements and commenced offering new programs to attract new students in order to increase student enrollments. Internationally, the agreements occurred with European and Chinese universities. An array of new academic programs included an undergraduate certificate in homeland security, included a finance concentration within the undergraduate business degree, and included the addition of a master's program in business administration.

These new programs attracted a variety of new students representing domestic and international origins. These efforts boosted enrollments of both undergraduate and graduate students. Although the quantities of students were increased among its various programs, the host institution observed an increase of academic dishonesty among students enrolled within its College of Business. Many of these incidents involved plagiarism. Therefore, the College of Business performed a Likert-scale survey to understand the motivations and perceptions of plagiarism among business students. Three issues were investigated within the survey: 1) student opinions regarding the necessary evil aspects of plagiarism, 2) student opinions of professionalism involving plagiarism, and 3) opinions about the legal nature of plagiarism.

This study represents a follow-up study to three other plagiarism studies that were performed by the host institution. Using ANOVA and a significance level of 0.05, the preceding explorations used stratifications of undergraduate versus graduate students, domestic versus international students, and full-time versus part-time students regarding their opinions of plagiarism (Doss, et al., 2016; Doss, et al., 2015a; He, et al., 2016; Liu, et al., 2016; Yang, et al., 2016). The following tables highlight the findings of the preceding studies.

Table 1

Undergraduate vs. Graduate Students

| Stratification | Concept | p-value | Statistical Significance |
|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Undergraduate Graduate | vs. Necessary Evil | 0.01 | Yes |
| Undergraduate Graduate | vs. Professionalism | 0.43 | None |
| Undergraduate Graduate | vs. Legality | 0.36 | None |

Note. Significance level of 0.05

Table 2*Domestic vs. International Students*

| Stratification | Concept | p-value | Statistical Significance |
|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Domestic vs. International | Necessary Evil | 0.0010 | Yes |
| Domestic vs. International | Professionalism | 0.0503 | None |
| Domestic vs. International | Legality | 0.0000 | Yes |

Note. Significance level of 0.05

Table 3*Part-Time vs. Full-Time Students*

| Stratification | Concept | p-value | Statistical Significance |
|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Part-Time vs. Full-Time | Necessary Evil | 0.1612 | None |
| Part-Time vs. Full-Time | Professionalism | 0.1216 | None |
| Part-Time vs. Full-Time | Legality | 0.0340 | Yes |

Note. Significance level of 0.05

The current study is a natural continuance of the former analyses because it explores the stratification of underclassmen versus upperclassmen regarding opinions of plagiarism. Therefore, this study continues the explorations of perspectives regarding the notions of necessary evil, professionalism, and legality.

Literature

Dishonesty is not uncommon among collegiate settings. Some arguments exist indicating that instances of dishonesty and cheating have increased through time (Jones, 2011). For instance, during 1988, approximately 49% of polled undergraduate students in marketing courses reported academic dishonesty whereas 100% of polled undergraduate majors in management reported cheating during 2008 (Brown, Weible, & Olmosk, 2010). During 1999, approximately 10% of students confessed to cutting and pasting materials derived from the Internet whereas approximately 40% confessed to doing so by 2005 (Peled, Eshet, & Grinautski, 2013). Both graduate and undergraduate students perform plagiarism. During a study involving 10,000 graduate students and 70,000 undergraduates, it was shown that approximately 59% and 62%, respectively, confessed to taking materials from online, virtual sources via the cut and paste method (McCabe, 2005). Instances of dishonesty involving plagiarism are ubiquitous, and affect academic institutions, commercial organizations, and government agencies (Doss, et al., 2016).

Plagiarism may be committed either unintentionally or intentionally. In many

cases, instances of plagiarism are unintentional without any underlying motivations associated with cheating (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005). In order to avoid instances of unintentional plagiarism, the use of direct intervention improves one's understanding of authoring, recognition of plagiarism, and writing confidence (Elander, et al., 2010). In London, a study showed that approximately 86% of polled students believed that such interventions contributed toward deterring plagiarism, and that approximately 66% of the polled students believed that intervention improved the ability to perform writing assignments (Elander, et al., 2010). Contrastingly, when intentional plagiarism is discovered, severe sanctioning, such as dismissing or suspending the student, must be contemplated gravely (Worthen, 2004).

An unfamiliarity with English may influence the committing of plagiarism (Walker, 2010). Similarly, the sufficiency of time allotted for completing academic assignments may influence the committing of plagiarism (Bista, 2011). Among some cultures, it may not be uncommon to use the exact verbiages, materials, or ideas of someone else because they are believed to belong to the entirety of society thereby making immaterial attributions and references (Mundava & Chaudhuri, 2007). Essentially, there is no sole reason for plagiarizing.

Plagiarism may be considered from the perspective of a necessary evil. Conceptually, this perspective involves the notion that plagiarism may be viewed as a necessity of achieving some amount of success academically (Doss, et al., 2015). In such cases, students may attempt some "last-minute efforts" to "slip" their assignments past their professors (Thomas, 2007, p. 81). Such actions may also occur because students lack esteem and confidence regarding their beliefs and abilities that they can produce quality materials or they waited too long before commencing to have sufficient time to complete the assignment (English, 2014).

Plagiarism may be considered ethically from a professional viewpoint. An example is the use of plagiarized material among "personal statements" required for employment purposes (Papadakis & Wofsy, 2010, p. 128). For instance, within the medical profession, Papadakis and Wofsy (2010) performed a study that yielded plagiarism evidence among approximately 10% of medical residency applications. Within the medical community, acts of plagiarism are deemed as unprofessional deeds (McCrink, 2010). Among professions, codes of ethics exist that govern and influence the conducts and behaviors of individuals (Doss, et al., 2015b). Despite the existence of such ethical codes, plagiarism persists among a variety of professions. A listing of incomprehensive examples includes engineering (Martin, 2013); sciences (Kruck, 2013); accounting (Liu, Yao, & Hu, 2012); and policing (Stout, 2011).

Plagiarism may be considered within a legal context. With respect to its academic considerations, no laws exist that make plagiarism illegal (Fallis, 2007). However, some instances of academic plagiarism necessitate consideration by the justice system. For instance, in the nation of Canada, both a professor and his employer (the University of Ottawa) were held accountable when an incident of plagiarism was heard within the justice system (Student Wins, 1997). In this case, Professor Jimming Lin was guilty of

plagiarizing a student's paper, submitting it to a conference in his own name, and selling copies of it for \$9 as classroom handouts (Student Wins, 1997). As a result, per court order, Lin and the University of Ottawa were directed to compensate the student an amount of \$7,500 for reimbursing legal fees and damages (Student Wins, 1997). Among commercial settings, copyright laws exist that protect the works of individuals and organizations, and violations of copyright laws are remedied within the justice system (Doss, Glover, Goza, & Wigginton, 2015b). Usually, such cases are heard among civil court proceedings (McElreath, et al., 2013).

Although the reviewed literature showed a variety of different plagiarism studies as underpinnings for the notions of necessary evil, professionalism, and legality, none addressed the differences in perspectives of underclassmen versus upperclassmen. Because of such an absence in the literature, this study provides some insight regarding the plagiarism views of underclassmen versus upperclassmen at a regional teaching institution.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study represents a continuation of former studies conducted by the host institution (Doss, et al., 2016; Doss, et al., 2015a; He, et al., 2016; Liu, et al., 2016; Yang, et al., 2016). This study retains the research questions, hypotheses, and ANOVA approach that represented the basis of the preceding studies. However, this study differs from its predecessors in that the stratification of perceptions herein involves an investigation of underclassmen versus upperclassmen opinions of plagiarism.

The primary research question of this study is: Do students perceive plagiarism as unethical and a stain within the scientific community? Sub-divisions of this research question are stated as follows:

- Do the students perceive plagiarism as a necessary evil?
- Do the students perceive plagiarism as unprofessional?
- Do the students perceive plagiarism as illegal?

Derived from the research sub-questions, the null hypotheses were:

H_1 : There is no statistically significant difference between the perceptions of underclassmen versus upperclassmen regarding the notion that plagiarism is a necessary evil.

H_2 : There is no statistically significant difference between the perceptions of underclassmen versus upperclassmen regarding the notion that plagiarism is unprofessional.

H_3 : There is no statistically significant difference between the perceptions of underclassmen versus upperclassmen regarding the notion that plagiarism is illegal.

Research Design and Methodology

This study examined the perspectives of two student groups regarding plagiarism: underclassmen and upperclassmen. The model used within this study incorporated student category as the independent variable whereas the dependent variable consisted of underclassmen and upperclassmen student groups. For the purposes of this study, underclassmen were defined as students whose enrollment status qualified them as freshmen and sophomores whereas upperclassmen were defined as students whose enrollment status qualified them as juniors and seniors. Generally, upperclassmen represented students who had completed at least 60 semester hours of credit whereas underclassmen represented students who had completed less than 60 semester hours of credit. A total of 60 semester hours represented the midpoint of credit within the undergraduate degree program because completion of the degree required passing 120 semester hours. The stratification of underclassmen versus upperclassmen was selected because it represented two stages of undergraduate progression: underclassmen with less than two years of exposure regarding institutional definitions and policies about plagiarism and upperclassmen who were exposed to at least two years of institutional definitions and policies regarding plagiarism. Online students were not included within this research.

This study used a Likert-scale survey in which the values of responses ranged between 1 (i.e., strongly disagree) and 5 (i.e., strongly agree). The value of 3 represented a neutral response. The Institutional Review Board approved the survey research project. The survey instrument was disseminated to underclassmen and upperclassmen within the College of Business. The principles of informed consent were disseminated among participants. Therefore, respondents were aware that they could cease participation in this study at any time or were free to choose not to participate.

The survey instrument incorporated two separate sections: 1) plagiarism questions and 2) demographic questions. The survey instrument involved the use of three composite scales that corresponded to each of the hypotheses: 1) scaled questions 1 through 12 corresponded to the necessary evil notion; 2) scaled questions 13 through 27 corresponded to the notion of professionalism; and 3) scaled questions 28 through 35 corresponded to the notion of legality. Items within the survey were derived from the works of Howard, Ehrich, and Walton (2014), faculty observations of works containing plagiarism, institutional policies of the host institution, and assessments of plagiarism incidents that occurred at the host institution. The foundations for the research questions, research design, and hypotheses were derived from the host institution's preceding studies that investigated student plagiarism perceptions (Doss, et al., 2016; Doss, et al., 2015a; He, et al., 2016; Liu, et al., 2016; Yang, et al., 2016).

The first survey scale dealt with plagiarism as a necessary evil. Table 4 presents question items related to this notion.

Table 4*Section 1 Survey Items Representing Necessary Evil – Questions 1 - 12*

| Item | Statement |
|-------------|---|
| 1 | I can plagiarize if I don't have enough time to meet a deadline. |
| 2 | I can't keep from using someone else's materials without citing because there are only so many ways of saying something. |
| 3 | People lie if they say they have absolutely never plagiarized something. |
| 4 | I sometimes use someone's materials verbatim as inspiration in my writing or speaking assignments. |
| 5 | Sometimes, I translate and copy materials that were published in a foreign language. |
| 6 | I have to plagiarize if something more important needs my attention. |
| 7 | I plagiarize materials simply because I haven't been caught yet. |
| 8 | I can use someone else's descriptions of methods because the method is unchangeable. |
| 9 | If my friends permit me to copy from their work, it's all right and nothing bad because I have their permission. |
| 10 | Plagiarism is absolutely necessary sometimes. |
| 11 | It is impossible for me to complete my work without plagiarizing some or all of it. |
| 12 | If one cannot write well in a foreign language, it is all right to copy materials that were previously published using that language. |

The second survey section dealt with professionalism views of plagiarism. Table 5 presents question items related to this notion.

Table 5*Section 2 Survey Items Representing Professionalism – Questions 13-27*

| Item | Statement |
|-------------|---|
| 13 | Plagiarism is a temptation because everyone else plagiarizes. |
| 14 | Plagiarism quashes intellectual curiosity. |
| 15 | Plagiarism within a high-value paper or speech may be ignored. |
| 16 | The identities of plagiarists should be announced openly. |
| 17 | This academic institution has no plagiarism. |
| 18 | Plagiarism is not a bad or wrong thing for me to do. |
| 19 | I do not feel bad about copying excerpts or whole materials from my previous works, and using them again for another class. |
| 20 | In the context of morals and ethics, it is important to discuss plagiarism. |
| 21 | People say they do not plagiarize, but do plagiarize materials. |
| 22 | Using someone else's materials without proper citing or referencing the other person is not deemed offensive or criminal in my culture. |
| 23 | Plagiarism is unacceptable within the context of professionalism |
| 24 | I believe plagiarism is unethical |
| 25 | I believe plagiarism is immoral |
| 26 | I believe plagiarism is criminal |
| 27 | I do not report my peers who I know plagiarize. |

The third survey section dealt with legality views of plagiarism. Table 6 presents question items related to this notion.

Table 6*Section 3 Survey Items Representing Legality – Questions 28-35*

| Item | Statement |
|-------------|---|
| 28 | Plagiarists should be punished by law. |
| 29 | Novice researchers or assistants should receive mild punishment or be merely warned for using some type of plagiarism. |
| 30 | It is justifiable to use my previous works without referencing myself to complete new works. |
| 31 | Plagiarism should be deemed unimportant even though it involves taking and using another's materials or concepts, but not their physical possessions. |
| 32 | Plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft. |
| 33 | Plagiarizing something is equivalent to stealing an exam or exam answers. |
| 34 | Plagiarists should be expelled from professions or occupations and punished appropriately. |
| 35 | Plagiarism in speeches or writing does no harm to the cumulative academic and scientific communities. |

The host institution exhibited a total of 312 students within its College of Business representing the cumulative set of underclassmen and upperclassmen. The acceptable sample size totaled 121 respondents (95% confidence level; 5 points). The survey instrument was issued during the first ten minutes of both day and night business classes. A total of 178 survey responses were retrieved thereby representing approximately 56% of the polled students. This quantity of responses (178) surpassed the minimum quantity of responses (121) that was deemed necessary for ensuring that the sample represented the population. Most likely, the high response rate occurred because the surveys were distributed to and collected from students during class meetings. Student respondent duplication was disallowed within this study.

The use of one-way, two-tailed ANOVA represented the method of examining differences of perceptions between underclassmen and upperclassmen. The Chi-Squared method was used to explore the potential of bias within the study by examining the distribution of expected responses versus the distribution of actual responses involving underclassmen versus upperclassmen. The level of significance for all hypothesis testing was 0.05. The Cronbach method was used to explore the reliability of the study.

For each composite scale, the scaled questions were assessed by using means analyses to identify directionality within the collected responses. Mean analysis approaches are subjective regarding their boundaries and limitations (McNabb, 2010). Within this study, boundaries for mean response analysis were as follows: 1) if mean value < 2.5, then disagreement; 2) if $2.5 \leq \text{mean value} \leq 3.5$, then neither agreement nor disagreement; and 3) if mean value > 3.5, then agreement.

Research Findings and Outcomes

The reliability of this study was assessed via the Cronbach method. Tappen (2011) indicates that Cronbach values exceeding the value of 0.70 may be considered as acceptable. Given such a benchmark, three of the four reliability values of the study were deemed acceptable. The following table shows the Cronbach value outcomes for the overall study and each of its corresponding composite scales.

Table 7
Cronbach Outcomes

| Entity | Item | Cronbach Value |
|---------------|------------------|----------------|
| Overall Study | Cumulative Study | 0.84 |
| Scale 1 | Necessary Evil | 0.86 |
| Scale 2 | Unprofessional | 0.67 |
| Scale 3 | Illegal | 0.74 |

Approximately 14.97% of the respondents reported an underclassmen status whereas approximately 85.03% of the respondents were upperclassmen. Approximately 87.53% of the respondents reported enrollment in day classes whereas approximately 12.65% were enrolled in night classes. Approximately 81.93% of the respondents reported less than five years of work experience whereas approximately 18.07% of respondents indicated more than five years of work experience.

The Chi-Squared method examined the influences of bias regarding the distribution of the disseminated surveys versus the reported distribution that was observed from the collected surveys. Using enrollment status as its basis, the Chi-Square analysis outcome ($\alpha = 0.05$; $X^2 = 0.0000$) was statistically significant. Thus, the potential of bias within this study was suggested.

Numerical descriptions of the first scale are presented within Table 8. This scale measured perceptions regarding the notion that plagiarism is a necessary evil.

Table 8
Numerical Descriptions for the First Scale (Questions 1 through 12)

| Item | Mean | Standard Deviation | Variance | Mode | Median |
|-------------------|------|--------------------|----------|------|--------|
| Scaled Ques. 1-12 | 1.90 | 1.16 | 1.34 | 1.0 | 2.0 |
| Underclassmen | 1.93 | 1.15 | 1.31 | 1.0 | 1.5 |
| Upperclassmen | 2.04 | 1.17 | 1.36 | 1.0 | 2.0 |

Numerical descriptions of the second scale are presented within Table 9. This scale measured perceptions regarding the notion that plagiarism is unprofessional.

Table 9*Numerical Descriptions for the Second Scale (Questions 13 through 27)*

| Item | Mean | Standard Deviation | Variance | Mode | Median |
|--------------------|------|--------------------|----------|------|--------|
| Scaled Ques. 13-27 | 2.80 | 1.35 | 1.82 | 1.0 | 3.0 |
| Underclassmen | 2.94 | 1.32 | 1.75 | 4.0 | 3.0 |
| Upperclassmen | 2.77 | 1.35 | 1.83 | 1.0 | 3.0 |

Numerical descriptions of the third scale are presented within Table 10. This scale measured perceptions regarding the notion that plagiarism is illegal.

Table 10*Numerical Descriptions for the Third Scale (Questions 28 through 35)*

| Item | Mean | Standard Deviation | Variance | Mode | Median |
|--------------------|------|--------------------|----------|------|--------|
| Scaled Ques. 28-35 | 2.69 | 1.20 | 1.43 | 3.0 | 3.0 |
| Underclassmen | 2.82 | 1.24 | 1.54 | 3.0 | 3.0 |
| Upperclassmen | 2.67 | 1.18 | 1.40 | 3.0 | 3.0 |

The ANOVA outcomes are presented within the following table. The hypothesis test used a significance level of 0.05.

Table 11*ANOVA Outcomes*

| Scale | ANOVA p-value | Effect Size | Statistical Significance |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Ques. 1-12 | 0.3225 | 0.0006 | None |
| Ques. 13-27 | 0.0228 | 0.0024 | Statistically Significant |
| Ques. 28-35 | 0.1146 | 0.0022 | None |

Note. Level of significance = 0.05

A statistically significant outcome was observed regarding the second scale, questions 13 through 27, regarding professionalism within the context of plagiarism. Within the scale, the underclassmen group mean was 2.94 whereas the upperclassman group mean was 2.77. The analysis of the means showed that both groups tended toward neutrality regarding the considered notion. The overall mean was 2.69 for the scale thereby showing neutrality.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The outcomes of this study may be considered with respect to the findings of its predecessors. Table 12 and Table 13 show these outcomes.

Table 12
Hypothesis Testing Outcomes of Former and Current Studies

| Perspective | Necessary Evil | Professionalism | Legality |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Undergraduate vs. Graduate | Statistical Significance | No Significance | Statistical Significance |
| Domestic vs. International | Statistical Significance | No Significance | Statistical Significance |
| Part-Time vs. Full-Time | No Significance | Statistical Significance | Statistical Significance |
| Current Study: Underclassmen vs. Upperclassmen | No Significance | Statistical Significance | No Significance |

Note: All studies used a 0.05 significance level.

Table 13
Cumulative Scale Means Analyses Outcomes of Former and Current Studies

| Perspective | Necessary Evil | Professionalism | Legality |
|--|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| Undergraduate vs. Graduate | Disagree | Neutral | Neutral |
| Domestic vs. International | Disagree | Neutral | Neutral |
| Part-Time vs. Full-Time | Disagree | Neutral | Neutral |
| Current Study: Underclassmen vs. Upperclassmen | Disagree | Neutral | Neutral |

The outcomes of this study showed a statistically significant outcome regarding professionalism views. It also showed disagreement with the notion that plagiarism was deemed a necessary evil, and showed neutrality regarding the examined professional and legal notions. These findings are commensurate with the outcomes of the preceding studies. Among all four studies, respondents exhibited disagreement with the notion that plagiarism was deemed a necessary evil, indicated neutrality regarding the professionalism notion, and showed neutrality regarding the legal perspective. Thus, this study confirms the outcomes of its predecessors.

During the final two years of enrollment, the host institution mandates that all upper-level business students experience seminar courses as preparatory measures for students entering the workforce. These seminars address issues of copyright violation and reinforce plagiarism policy with the academic context. However, during the first two years of study, underclassman plagiarism awareness occurs via new student orientation and during the explanations of course syllabi at the onset of classes. Thus, within this study, the statistically significant outcome between underclassmen and upperclassmen may be explainable by the seminar series.

Given the outcomes of this study and its predecessors, the host institution may consider improving its awareness of plagiarism within the student body. Although varying levels of awareness exist throughout all four years of undergraduate study, topics of plagiarism and copyright violation are strongly emphasized during the final two years of upperclassman studies. Seemingly, given the means analyses outcomes of the four studies, plagiarism efforts are successful in generating a mindset that plagiarism is unnecessary when completing class assignments. However, among all four studies, both underclassmen and upperclassmen expressed neutrality regarding issues involving professionalism and legality. Thus, it appears that the host institution is successful when achieving a student understanding of plagiarism within the academic context, but not necessarily from legal, practical, or occupational perspectives. For instance, to benefit upperclassmen in the seminar series, the host institution may better explain the realities of copyright violations or professional codes of ethics among workplace settings. For benefitting underclassmen, the host institution may incorporate greater quantities of realistic case studies, beyond the business law class, that address ethical codes, intellectual property, copyrights, and consequences.

The preceding studies examined domestic versus international, graduate versus undergraduate, and part-time versus full-time student perspectives. This study continued the institutional line of research by examining perspectives of underclassmen versus upperclassmen. Future studies may further examine the collected data from the perspectives of day versus night students or gender. Besides plagiarism, a variety of other issues affect higher education institutions. Examples range from inflated grades to class attendance (Doss, Pitts, & Kamery, 2006; Moore, Armstrong, & Pearson, 2008; Pitts, Doss, & Kamery, 2005a; Pitts, Doss, & Kamery, 2005b). Future studies may examine the potentials of relationships between inflated grades versus plagiarism and class attendance versus plagiarism.

Future studies may examine facets of student residency and plagiarism. Living on the campus of a higher education institution contributes positively toward both student “learning and success academically” (Sheffield, 2016, p. 19). It also contributes to stronger amounts of engagement among students within the academic setting (Sheffield, 2016). Given these notions, future studies may examine some aspects of plagiarism versus students that are housed on-campus or those who live off-campus.

In any case, the outcomes and conclusions of this study provide some insight regarding student beliefs and opinions of plagiarism at a rural teaching institution. It was

beyond the scope of this study to consider any characteristics of causation. However, future studies may consider such a topic. Although the outcomes of this study lacked universal practicality, the host institution improved its understanding of student perceptions regarding plagiarism. Institutions of similar size and academic offerings may find some value in this study when addressing plagiarism policies or deterring plagiarism.

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