ADDRESSING PLAGIARISM POLICY ROADBLOCKS

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Presentation Description

College of DuPage writing coaches discuss the many roadblocks involved when attempting to enforce plagiarism rules. Caught between protecting students' privacy and the college's Academic Code of Conduct, coaches often feel their hands are tied. A discussion intended to shine a light on the complex issue of avoiding plagiarism.

Presentation Summary

Presenters Elyse Pelzer and Deanna Basco, 11 and 9-year veteran tutors of College of DuPage (COD) Writing, Reading, Speech Assistance (WRSA), discussed the challenges preventing students from understanding, or perhaps taking seriously, plagiarism and the roadblocks that tutors face in enforcing plagiarism policies. Before beginning, attendees were given written scenarios regarding plagiarism issues seen in WRSA and asked to address how they would handle the situation in a five-minute free-write. Then, a short video of several WRSA tutors describing cases of plagiarism they have witnessed was shown, with examples seemingly both intended and unintended.

Following the video, the presenters explained that the term "plagiarism," or some variation of it, was mentioned 35 times on focus sheets prepared by tutors after appointments during the last two semesters. Conversely, official plagiarism violations filed with the Dean of Students' Office averaged 24 per year, over the last three years. Highlighted was how enrollment of 28,000 students each semester, according to COD's website, resulted in just 24 students violating plagiarism rules a year per Dean of Students' Office vs. 35 mentions over two semesters in WRSA, where students are divided into three categories for help: writing, reading and speech. This discrepancy leads to questioning whether students who plagiarize are able to slip through the cracks of following rules by not getting educated or caught, and, if so, can anything be done to prevent this from happening.

Three main factors led the discussion: COD's Academic Code of Conduct guidelines allow faculty to decide how to handle plagiarism violations, instructors' interpretations of standard citation rules can often be confusing to follow, and various comprehension levels and

cultural differences all cause roadblocks for tutors working with students who have plagiarized.

Attendees were asked to consider what they would do if a student told them they were going to cheat on an exam, and then what they would do if a student said they were going to use information from an outside source without citing it. Questions were raised as to why there would be a difference in reactions, if one exists.

After this discussion, presenters resumed talking about the three main points, beginning with faculty discretion leading to fewer recorded plagiarism violations. COD's Code of Honesty states that after meeting with a student suspected of plagiarizing, "If it is determined the violation is unintended, the faculty may offer a chance to advance the student's learning and not impose a sanction." This means that one student could potentially get a hand slap, under the guise of a learning experience, multiple times throughout their college career. Can anything be done to keep this from happening?

The second point of faculty having the right to alter the rules of citation usage leading to confusion for the student was brought up. Deanna shared an extreme case of this involving a student who came into the writing center because he was confused by his instructor's version of self-plagiarizing, which resulted in a paper almost entirely in quotation marks being submitted. The student was warned that if he repeated quotes he had used in an earlier paper, including an interview with his father, that would be self-plagiarism and reason to fail the class.

Following this, it was pointed out that some assignments may require more challenging citations, leading to greater confusion. For example, Deanna attended a citation workshop presented by COD's library and asked how to avoid over-citing certain research papers, such as nursing students' research of diseases, which is confusing to the tutor and the student. After a pause, the presenter ironically recommended Deanna ask the Learning Commons WRSA for advice.

General roadblocks faced by tutors in WRSA were then discussed. First mentioned was the discomfort of addressing plagiarism suspicions without being too accusatory. After explaining the importance of citing and what plagiarism is, tutors are often unsure how much further to go. The second roadblock of cultural differences, such as viewing the use of another's work as a sign of respect, adds to difficulty in conveying the importance of citing sources. The third roadblock occurs while interacting with students with learning disabilities, as some assignments and requirements may be beyond a student's level of comprehension or abilities,

leading them to get extra "help." Elyse worked with such a student and saw how difficult it was to construct one complete sentence; one day, after weeks of working together, the student came in with perfectly constructed paragraphs. When questioned about the content, the student said his mother had "helped" him. When asked how, the student outwardly stated, "She wrote it," with no comprehension that this was not okay. Elyse explained that this could be considered plagiarism and printed the college's plagiarism policies for the student before he left. Unfortunately, the student never came back.

In the past, tutors were asked not to contact instructors, resulting in feelings of moral and ethical dilemma. However, this policy is currently being reviewed at COD's WRSA, and staff is debating how we might change to better serve the students in terms of how plagiarism is handled. The points discussed so far were reflected in the original scenarios handed out at the beginning of the presentation, and then attendees were asked how they responded.

The presenters then shared a newly proposed plagiarism policy created by the WRSA, based on 3-strikes. First strike, the tutor discusses plagiarism and how to avoid it, followed by a detailed focus sheet emailed to the WRSA Coordinator. Second strike, the Coordinator will contact the student who will then work with a tutor to review an online plagiarism module and complete a pre/post-test. If the student still plagiarizes, exhibiting a conscious pattern, the Coordinator will contact the student's instructor and the student will lose writing center privileges for the rest of the semester. To end, helpful WRSA resources available to faculty were reviewed.