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July 8, 2003

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Mr. Scott A. Kelly, Deputy General Council  
Texas A&M University System

**THROUGH:** Dr. David B. Prior  
Executive Vice President & Provost

**THROUGH:** Dr. William L. Perry  
Vice Provost

**FROM:** Dr. Pierce E. Cantrell  
Associate Provost for Information Technology

Dr. Elizabeth D. Tebeaux, Director *edt*  
Office of Distance Education

**SUBJECT:** Questions Involving the Use of Plagiarism Detection Software

*Pierce - I spoke with Scott and he did not see a problem in purchasing for me. He did have some suggestions regarding procedures to follow in using. Proceed w/ purchase. Bell Perry  
Let's discuss with Karan Watson. Please proceed with her in my absence. 8/7/03*

The President's Task Force on Academic Integrity has recommended that the University purchase a site license for plagiarism detection software to be used for checking student work. One of the leading vendors of this type of software is *Turnitin.com* <http://www.turnitin.com>, and we are considering their service. A number of universities (see Attachment 1) are using this kind of software as a deterrent to plagiarism because it effectively finds material that students have copied from the Web or essays that students may have bought/borrowed from earlier student submissions.

We need to know if there are any legal issues that suggest that we should not begin using plagiarism detection software. Furthermore, we seek your guidance on procedures we should follow if we are to use such software.

**Plagiarism and the Decline of Academic Integrity**

Problems in maintaining academic integrity plague universities, including Texas A&M. President Gates has authorized a special presidential task force to launch a new academic integrity system for the University. Recommendations for this new system were developed by a group that studied academic integrity processes and honor systems at various universities. A year of work by this committee resulted in a 26-page recommendation report that will be readied for implementation by the presidential task force.

To help faculty detect plagiarism, software services like *Turnitin.com* and programs like EVE <http://www.canexus.com/eve> have been developed (see Attachment 2 from Google). Students or faculty may submit work to *Turnitin.com*. The software checks student papers against other student work previously submitted and against material on the Web. The system returns an originality report (see Attachments 3 and 4) with suspected plagiarized material highlighted and a link given to the source material. The course instructor can configure the system to either allow or disallow students from viewing their own originality report.

In short, *Turnitin.com* tracks sources copied from the Web and papers written by others and then copied by students. *Turnitin.com* is particularly helpful in tracking “canned” papers available off the Web, from sorority/fraternity files, and from commercial research paper companies. For faculty members who assign similar writing assignments each year, the search database will include all of their previously submitted student papers.

Many other universities are using *Turnitin.com* and with good success. While the tool shows faculty where students seem to have copied material, it does not eliminate the faculty member’s responsibility of checking/reading the student’s paper.

### **Student Intellectual Property and Turnitin.com**

Once a paper is examined by the *Turnitin.com* system, the paper becomes a part of their database. The advantage is clear: any other student who uses/copies that paper risks being caught by a teacher who uses *Turnitin.com*. Some faculty have expressed a concern about students’ intellectual property rights. While the paper is stored in the database, *Turnitin.com* does not release the entire original document. Only the matching sections are marked, and contact information is provided for the faculty member to whom the original material was submitted.

*Turnitin.com* engaged the law firm of Foley and Lardner to analyze whether their use of student work meets the requirements of copyright laws, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and the Child Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). While they viewed the inclusion of student papers in the *Turnitin.com* database as the most “legally sensitive aspect of the *Turnitin.com* system,” their conclusion is that “the minimal use of a student’s work to ferret out plagiarism ... is a fair use that does not infringe any copyright...” The Foley and Lardner opinion is available at [http://www.turnitin.com/static/legal\\_document.html](http://www.turnitin.com/static/legal_document.html).

At a recent intellectual-property conference presentation, the speaker recommended that faculty who want to use *Turnitin.com* in their classes should say so in their course syllabus (see Attachment 5 from Cantrell’s ELEN 602 class), and the faculty member should also carefully explain their intent to use *Turnitin.com* during the opening days of the course. Furthermore, the speaker suggested that the university’s catalogs should contain a statement about academic integrity, and the university’s intention to use plagiarism-tracking tools. This information could be included with a description of the honor system.

### **The New Honor System**

The New Honor System can/will include a statement that the University intends to use technology to track, teach, and enforce academic integrity. Students will be informed about the honor system prior to its implementation.

Part of the educational process on plagiarism will be a clear definition of what plagiarism means, how to avoid it, how to cite sources correctly, and why plagiarism will not be permitted.

Students who do not want their work to be subject to scrutiny for plagiarism should not attend TAMU.

As part of the effort to make students constantly aware of the need for academic integrity, faculty will be encouraged to have students sign a statement for every assignment that they have not plagiarized or received unauthorized help on the assignment. One goal of the Task Force is to keep the level of awareness high about the importance of academic integrity.

Improving academic integrity at Texas A&M University requires support from administration, faculty, staff, and students. Using *Turnitin.com* is only one of many enforcement tools and approaches that will be used to deter plagiarism.

Attachment 1 – Partial List of Schools Using Turnitin.com

Attachment 2 – Plagiarism Detection Services and Software from Google

Attachment 3 – Originality Report Example from Turnitin.com

Attachment 4 – Originality Report from Cantrell's ELEN 602 Class

Attachment 5 – ELEN 602 Term Project Description