Plagiarism Prevention
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PLAGIARISM PREVENTION

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AS A FORMER EXECUTIVE, I feel strongly that college graduates should enter the workforce with exceptional oral and written communication skills. Now that I am an educator, I also believe that students should have numerous opportunities to enhance their writing skills, even beyond the “required” writing courses. Therefore, I assign at least one writing assignment every semester in all my courses. The classes that I teach are undergraduate management courses (Organizational Behavior, Human Resource Management, and International Business Strategy) where I assign a business case for analysis and a written group paper. I also teach an Operations Management course where I assign individual research papers.

Sadly, plagiarism does exist at universities today. In some cases, students are naïve with respect to understanding what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. In other cases, students blatantly disregard and disrespect the written work of others, claiming it as their own. Regardless, we must be vigilant in our efforts to discourage and prevent plagiarism from occurring. Here are some recommendations that may help:

- **Change assignments every time.** Each semester, I assign a different business case for small group (5-7 students) analysis and a written report. Introducing a new case each time eliminates the opportunity for casual friends and acquaintances and/or highly organized students (fraternities, sororities, student clubs, etc.) to share papers from previous semesters. In addition, many of the business case publishers also offer “teaching notes” to assist instructors when using their cases. I intentionally do not use the questions recommended by these sources, making my assignments more unique and less prone to being plagiarized.

- **Create unique course-specific assignments.** For individual research papers, I require students to analyze a company using specific topics that are covered in the course. For example, in Operations Management,
students should explore and write about how a company addresses topics such as outsourcing, sustainability, quality, and the like. This ensures that there will be few (if any) existing papers that could be plagiarized to satisfy the requirements of the assignment.

- **Use technology.** BlackBoard has a feature called SafeAssign, which is similar to tools such as Turnitin and others. It is very easy to set up a “SafeAssignment,” which requires that students electronically submit their written paper. (I also require a hard copy to be turned in to make grading easier.) SafeAssign checks the paper against its database and the Internet and provides a “matching” score that gives an indication of the probability of plagiarism. Instructors can create the assignments using different criteria, but I allow students the opportunity to submit drafts of their paper to see their matching scores. This enables the student to revise the paper to eliminate plagiarized and/or poorly cited passages before a final version is submitted (and in the process, valuable lessons are learned!). Once submitted, the students’ work becomes part of the SafeAssign database for future comparisons for all universities that use the tool.

  SafeAssign provides guidelines to interpret the matching scores. Scores below 15% indicate that there is little evidence of plagiarism. Scores between 15% and 40% should be reviewed to check for proper attribution. Scores over 40% indicate that there is a high probability of plagiarism. Since this is the first semester that I have been using SafeAssign, I was curious to see how things were going, so I checked my assignments over the 2 weeks prior to the due date. I saw that some student scores were initially in the 50% to 70% range but were subsequently reduced to scores of less than 20%. In these cases, I suspect that students intentionally submitted copied work to “test” the system. So by using SafeAssign, students have learned to rewrite their papers to properly cite references and to communicate correctly in their own words.

- **Walk the talk: Check your own papers.** As educators we must ensure that we ourselves are not inadvertently plagiarizing! SafeAssign also has a feature called “Direct Submit,” which allows an upload and plagiarism checks of any paper. To test this feature, I submitted this paper and was pleased (but not surprised) to see my 0% matching score.

Although we may not be able to completely eliminate plagiarism from occurring, perhaps we can make it so difficult that students resort to just doing their own work because it is much easier that way? What a concept!
Christine Probett is a lecturer in the Management and Information & Decision Systems Departments at the San Diego State University. In her work, she is directly concerned with teaching strategy, human resources, organizational behavior, and operations management courses. She was previously president of the Aircraft Interior Products Division of Goodrich Corporation, and she retired in 2006 with over 20 years’ experience in the aerospace industry. Address correspondence to Christine Probett, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182-8234; email: cprobett@mail.sdsu.edu.