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Kelly Ritter

## The Economics of Authorship: Online Paper Mills, Student Writers, and First-Year Composition

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Using sample student analyses of online paper mill Web sites, student survey responses, and existing scholarship on plagiarism, authorship, and intellectual property, this article examines how the consumerist rhetoric of the online paper mills construes academic writing as a commodity for sale, and why such rhetoric appeals to students in first-year composition, whose cultural disconnect from the academic system of authorship increasingly leads them to patronize these sites.

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*"Gone are the days of scholarly pursuit; here are the days of economic and social advancement. . . [these Web sites] aren't going to go away. . ."*  
—“Ellen,” an English 101 student, from “The Internet as a Resource for Academic Dishonesty”

**T**he question of what constitutes plagiarism, let alone how to address its many permutations in this age of electronic cut-and-paste, has characterized much of the recent research into academic dishonesty both inside and outside composition studies. This scholarship promotes the notion that one egregious type of plagiarism—the patronage of online term-paper mills—is a willfully deceptive act that needs no further study against the less wholesale, more “com-

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plicated” forms that merit examination. Purchasing a term paper is engaging in “the plagiarism that approaches fraud” (Howard 160) and is the academic sin that we most dread our students’ committing. I propose that online paper mills have thus been allowed to prosper in the absence of true critical reflection on their persuasive power, especially in composition studies, where definitions of authorship are the most contested and where student understanding of authorial agency is the most tenuous. There are compelling reasons that an examination of the consumer-driven discourse of online paper mills should be integrated into our research on student authorship, in the context of how it competes for, and often wins, our students’ attention.

**First-year composition students today carefully weigh interconnected economic, academic, and personal needs when choosing whether to do their own college writing and research or purchase it elsewhere.**

First-year composition students today carefully weigh interconnected economic, academic, and personal needs when choosing whether to do their own college writing and research or purchase it elsewhere. Instead of employing the World Wide Web to piece together a paper of their own, these students often are seeking out already-finished, available-for-purchase papers by nameless and faceless authors, so as to meet their academic ends more quickly and with more certainty of success (i.e., a finished paper is a better bet than a pieced-together product of unknown resulting quality). Without these students—who do not believe that they can or should be authors of their own academic work, but do believe that they can *and should* co-opt the accomplished authorship of others when necessary—the anonymous and powerful online paper-mill industry could not exist. First-year composition students are the most likely group to fall victim to this industry, as they are not only unfamiliar with the university and its discourse but also enrolled in a required course that emphasizes the development of intellectual identity through writing. Anxious about the course and sometimes even angry that a new form of writing is being foisted upon them, one that often contradicts or complicates what the time and space of their high school English curriculum allowed them to learn, first-year composition students may quite literally buy into the paper mills’ rhetoric. In the process, they shape their lifelong perceptions of what authorship in academia really means.

These students patronize online paper mills not because of any desire to outwit the academic system of authorship, but because of their cultural and ideological disconnection from the system itself. The rhetoric present in online paper mills and in our students’ support of them challenges our comfortable

and traditional definition of plagiarism, which is predicated upon academia's intrinsic defense of authorship as an intellectual, creative activity. The paper-mill Web sites, in order to rationalize their existence, negate the academic value of authorship in their easy online commerce with our students, instantly changing that innocent eighteen-year-old in one's composition class from an author to a plagiarist, or, in the rhetoric of the paper-mill sites, from a student to a *consumer*. In order to truly understand how and why students continue to engage in dishonest practices in the composition classroom, we thus must seek to understand how and when students see themselves as authors; how students see themselves as *consumers*, not just in the purchase of a college education, but also in a society defined by anonymity, convenience, and privacy; and how students reconcile the warring concepts of author and consumer in the space of their own writing.

The composition-studies community has yet to tackle two important questions underlying these students' absent notions of authorship. First, what is the complicated relationship already in place between *student* authors and consumer culture that dictates the role that writing plays in one's college career? Second, how might this relationship explain why the online paper mills consistently, even exponentially, profit from our students' patronage? Since first-year students do not, and perhaps *cannot*, always share faculty definitions of authorship and intellectual property, they cannot always reconcile their personal and academic needs with our course standards, which reinforce the idea that authorship is valuable, and that academic work itself is more than an economic means to an end. Addressing these questions thus begins a necessary inquiry into how and why our students frequently see college writing—their own, their friends', that which is provided by the paper mills—as an economic rather than an intellectual act.

When considering whether, when, and how often to purchase an academic paper from an online paper-mill site, first-year composition students therefore work with two factors that I wish to investigate here in pursuit of answering the questions posed above: the negligible desire to do one's own writing, or to be an author, with all that entails in this era of faceless authorship vis-à-vis the Internet; and the ever-shifting concept of "integrity," or responsibility when purchasing work, particularly in the anonymous arena of online consumerism. This latter concept is contingent upon the lure of a good academic/economic bargain—the purchased paper that might raise or solidify one's academic standing in the form of a "good" grade. To investigate these factors from a student standpoint, I will contextualize scholarly approaches to the notions of

authorship, textual production, and academic dishonesty with not just samples of the discourse found on the paper mill Web sites, but also select responses from both a coursewide student survey completed by 247 students enrolled in

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English 101 (research-based first-year composition) during one semester at my institution, and responses from an English 101 essay assignment, in which my own students (who have given me permission to cite their work here using pseudonyms)

visited select paper-mill Web sites and analyzed the arguments put forth persuading students to buy their products. By privileging student responses in my study of the online paper mills and their antiacademic (and proeconomic) discourse, I hope to emphasize the important role that students themselves might play in our scholarship on this and allied subjects, as the responses articulate a compelling range of multilayered (and often internally competing) student perceptions of academic dishonesty and authorship.

### **I. Invisible Agencies: Student Authors versus “Real” Writers**

What students must do is become confident in themselves and believe that they can do their own work. The students who buy these papers off these paper mills should see themselves as being capable of doing a paper just like the ones they are buying [. . .] once students become confident with themselves and the work they do, they will stop plagiarizing [. . .].

—“Betty,” an English 101 student, from “Technology: The Leading Cause of Academic Dishonesty”

Some scholars argue that authorship in the twenty-first century is about negotiating the giant collage of available information that undermines the authority of a single author in favor of multiple, combined identities. One of the leading scholars on plagiarism, Rebecca Moore Howard, argues that studying the ever-shifting notions of author and text, and the way in which students inevitably “patch” together sources from their textual (and hypertextual) universes in the collaborative research act, is a more productive use of our time than focusing on detection and punishment. In her article “Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty,” Howard states that patchwork comes from writers’ engagement with “unfamiliar discourse, when they must work monologically with the words and ideas of a source text” (796), and ar-

gues that “it is [. . .] reasonable to revise definitions of plagiarism to account for the contingent nature of authorship” (798). In her monograph *Standing in the Shadow of Giants*, Howard further articulates the issue as stemming from a “new binary: plagiarist/author” whose premise is “Writers who are mimetic and who collaborate with their texts are not authors. They are, at best, students. If they fail to acknowledge their mimesis or collaboration with source texts, they are plagiarists. If they are both plagiarist and student, they are punished” (75–76).

As a possible counterpoint to Howard’s theories, Candace Spigelman argues in *Across Property Lines* that “[f]or readers, the substance of a written work is always a kind of public property” (6) and thus true ownership of student writing comes only with a recognition of students as “the central authority, the ‘authors’ and the ‘owners’ of their texts” (54). This is in contrast to Howard’s assertion that all sources are equal parts of a student’s hybrid written discourse, as Spigelman believes that students can and do recognize their position as creators of knowledge which is vulnerable to appropriation by others, even as this stems from complicated notions of “property.” In Spigelman’s study of writing groups and their perceptions of authorship and textual ownership, she finds that

most student writers do think of themselves as textual “owners” (at least to the extent that they can think of themselves this way, given the competing urgencies of teacher evaluation and appropriation) because they “know” that writers “own” their texts. They may feel the urgency to hide or hoard their words, their thoughts, their ideas, in part because they feel fellow students will “steal” them [. . .]. (23)

For Spigelman, this concept of ownership explains the reticence on the part of some students to participate in, or even attend, peer workshops. But what her assertion also evidences is a fear among students that information may indeed be “stolen” from one’s paper and used by a classmate. Spigelman’s research indicates a real disconnect between how teachers seek evidence of intellectual exchange in student writing and how students resist that exchange sometimes entirely. I submit that this resistance, and confusion over who “owns” the text, leads some students to abandon their authorship rights altogether in favor of obtaining a “good” piece of academic writing that better suits the teacher’s needs.

Spigelman’s and Howard’s approaches to understanding plagiarism emphasize sound student-centered pedagogy over time-consuming out-of-class investigative work. Both also recognize the fact that students often do not ac-

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knowledge their authorship in the context of existing and voluminous published works that serve as “sources” for student writing. But I would add that these revisions to our discourse about plagiarism should *also* focus on the idea of authorship and the concept of “stealing” writing, as our students understand it, when pondering *whole-text* plagiarism such as that which occurs in the purchase of a previously authored paper. These occasions of whole-text plagiarism may fail to “patch” together source material, but they still show a lack of recognition on the students’ part that authorship is valuable and that published writing is more than a product for the taking.

I suspect that we have thus far dismissed online paper-mill patronage as a site of study because this type of academic dishonesty goes to the core of our popular, capitalist culture, itself predicated on the exchange of specialized, even personalized, goods and services, of which papers-for-sale are only one possibility. In Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi’s seminal anthology *The Construction of Authorship*, which interrogates historical notions of copyright, authorship, and text, David Sanjek points out that in one area of highly commercial exchange—music sampling—“it is a longstanding practice for consumers to customize their commodities, command their use and meaning before they are commanded by them” (343). Faculty frequently fail to see (or refuse to engage with) the complexity of the online paper-mill structure that engages in this business of “customized commodities” and entices students to buy papers that are written *just for them* and delivered via the privacy of e-mail. In our zeal to punish students and protect the sanctity of intellectual property and academic scholarship, we overlook the complexity of the students’ academic needs, which sometimes are in conflict with their own personal ethics and morals, and the complexity of the Internet as it has been embraced by not just our larger popular culture, but also the smaller intellectual culture of academia. This embrace of the Internet as a resource and at the same time acknowledgment of the Internet as a site of dishonesty is a paradox that academia cannot, ultimately, reconcile.

Howard in particular resists addressing paper mills as a subject of study, arguing that “[c]ertainly, morality is the major factor in the purchase of term papers [ . . . ] and it may apply to other types of plagiarism, as well, depending upon the writer’s intentions” (“Plagiarisms” 797). Further, she argues that submitting papers that are not one’s own and engaging in patchwriting are “sub-

sets” of plagiarism, such that “one is intentional, the other unintentional” (“Ethics” 80). For Howard, “unintentional plagiarism” is committed by students who are “ignorant of academic ethics [. . . the act is] unintentionally unethical” (80). The distinction is logical: when one pastes together sources, he or she *may* do so in ignorance of how to cite properly, or, as Howard hypothesizes, how to negotiate multiple authorships as relevant to academic discourse. To then claim, however, that the purchase of papers is by definition “intentional” and thus deliberately unethical because, by design, it does not seek to negotiate multiple sources in a dialogue is perhaps too simple a conclusion to draw. As Howard herself recognizes, “if the plagiarism was intentional, we then need to know motivations” (*Standing* 163).

I believe that we cannot just dismiss the use of online paper mills as demonstrably different than typical, random acts of plagiarism, thus rendering the practice not worthy of critical study, simply because on the surface intent *seems* more clear and by extension the student’s ethics seem more malleable (or altogether absent). Nor can we say unequivocally that those who buy papers from the online paper mills are savvy about authorship to the extent that they fully *understand* “academic ethics.” If we do, we are indeed engaging in the time-tested practice that Howard describes of putting “the student writer (at) the bottom of the hierarchy” (*Standing* 138) in which intent is fixed and uniform among the population, and where ethical discussions do not apply to economically driven models of authorship.

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In order for first-year composition students to understand complicated ethical standards, they must first understand their own place in the economics and politics of the academy itself. In his article “Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition,” Bruce Horner argues that the “author/student writer binary” is what keeps composition students from achieving agency in the academy (505). Horner asserts that until students understand the binary and its classroom construction, they may not overcome the limits imposed upon them as aspiring authors:

Efforts to teach students to establish rhetorical authority risk bracketing the work of the classroom from the social and reinscribing the status quo of the “author,” naming *as* the social a uniform official view of the classroom, unless they are

accompanied by students' critique of the conditions of the various practices by which types of "authorship" are socially produced, as well as those producing its opposite, the "student writer." (520)

Horner specifically takes issue with the conflicting messages that composition teachers send to students about their ability to be authors. He cites the work of Nancy Sommers, who argues that we should respond to the content of student work, rather than correcting it, while at the same time we "sabotage our students' conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent" (qtd. in Horner 511). Horner's emphasis on the message that Sommers and others send, and which Spigelman has proven that students do in fact receive, is crucial to our understanding of how and why first-year composition students, skeptical of their own abilities as new agents in academic discourse and aware of the prestige that published authors gain in the academy, might seek out these "complete and coherent" products elsewhere.

Horner additionally points out that composition is often a course driven by commodification, limited by institutional working conditions, and taken by time-conscious students who strive to be "cost-effective" and thus seek to make writing a *product* they must produce in order to get "more bang for their tuition bucks while having less time to devote to their writing" (522). When we consider these two elements of Horner's argument in relation to online paper mills, it becomes clear that the paper mills by design play upon the new

college writer and her perception of the author/student writer binary, sidestepping issues of plagiarism by sidestepping notions of the author, from whom to "steal," altogether. Add to this a very quick "bang for the buck" in the fast and easy access that students have to these papers from their home or school computers, and it becomes plausible

that the success of online paper mills stems from students' desire to *succeed* through false or purchased authorship, particularly when that authorship comes vis-à-vis faceless online exchange.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that first-year composition students *could* see themselves as authors in some writing situations outside academe, but fail to see how multidimensional the definition of authorship may be in the academy and in the larger culture. In my survey, when English 101 students were asked what "being an author" meant to them, the choices provided deliberately complicated

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the idea that authorship may be only one thing.<sup>2</sup> The most frequently recognized “type” of author was reflected in the 45 percent of respondents who said that being an author is “writing something for which one may become famous or well-known.” Students know that individuals may become “famous” based on their writing; these sorts of writers are “authors.” In addition, 58 percent of those surveyed recognized that “writing anything, whether it is academic or not and whether it is published or not” constitutes authorship. Only 39 percent of the students surveyed said that “writing material for the Internet (either a personal or business Web site)” constitutes authorship. This indicates that many composition students do not see writing that is posted on the Internet as “authored” material, which is understandable given the proliferation of anonymous Web sites and the ease with which anyone may create a Web site and thus become an “author” without having the writing screened for content or quality.

When this hypothesis is extended to paper-mill Web sites, it is clear that the material there, in addition to being offered up by nameless and faceless individuals, is also truly “authorless” by design. This would include the papers available for purchase, even though at least one of the companies, the Paper Store, sells papers listing the original author’s name at the top and a warning at the bottom of each page which states, “No portion of this document may be reprinted without proper attribution to the Paper Store as a source” (Mohr-Corrigan 1). Even citing this quotation for the purposes of this article, however, is complicated: is Lori Mohr-Corrigan the “author” of this statement, simply because the Paper Store states that this is her paper for sale and includes the warning on her authored paper? Or is the Paper Store the legal “author,” as the statement would indicate? This blurring of boundaries tells students that authorship is generally up for grabs, and that, of course, none of the admonitions mean much, since Mohr-Corrigan was not involved *directly* in this sale of her work (no arrangement was made between Mohr-Corrigan and my student, who purchased and distributed copies of “Role of Women” to our English 101 class for purposes of discussion related to this project) and since the Paper Store additionally claims that Mohr-Corrigan’s paper was “Research [sic], Owned, and Published Globally” by them (1).

Based on responses in my survey, it appears that the majority of English 101 students would not recognize Ms. Mohr-Corrigan as an author if she were also a student, and would thus likely give over her authorship rights quite easily to the Paper Store. While 64 percent of the students surveyed said that “writ-

ing a book or academic article” constitutes authorship, only 35 percent thought that “writing a paper or project for a college course” constituted authorship as well. So it seems that even though students may recognize that academia produces authors, the responses indicate that only a third of the students considered *themselves* authors, even though all were in the process of writing an “academic” paper for English 101.

Although the economic “collaboration” between a student and the online paper mill is obviously outside the limits of traditional notions of authorship, one might postulate that students see this collaboration as a profitable one, with both the original author and the “new” author (the student who purchases the paper) receiving some sort of marginal intellectual credit. But student survey responses contradict the notion that *any* sort of coauthorship leads to a legitimately “authored” piece of work. In my survey, only 35 percent of those surveyed felt that co-writing a project constituted authorship. An even smaller percentage—only 6 percent—believed that “gathering different sources and pasting them together as a collection of writing, then putting your name on that collection” constituted authorship, seemingly contradicting the notion that students do feel “ownership” over cut-and-paste written products. So, in addition to the more obvious conclusion that collaboration or co-writing is viewed by students (and some sectors of academia) as less than “true” author-

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ship, one might postulate that the process by which students purchase papers also is not seen a *merging* of identities to form a combined authorship (i.e., buy that paper but put your own name on it and it becomes yours), but instead a wholesale lifting of another’s identity for a single purpose—the completion of a college assignment. Such

lifting would, in theory, meet all requirements, as most of the sites explain that the papers are fully “researched” and include citations and bibliographies or works cited pages.

First-year composition students may only occasionally view themselves as authors, and by extension infrequently view the papers they buy online as “authored,” because they also place so little value on the actual work they produce as college students. In my survey, just about a third of the students agreed that “most of the papers I have written for college courses could best be defined as [. . .] material that has no use outside the particular course or area of

study.” Only 26 percent felt that their papers contained “material that may be used in other situations, such as a job or professional applications.” The most interesting statistic, however, comes from the small percentage (11 percent) of respondents who felt that their papers were “material that in no way represents who I am as a writer.” This would appear to be a mismatch between student self-conceptions of potential authorship (the work *does* reflect who they are) and the assignment for which this work was produced (the work *does not* have future value). We need to discuss in our composition classes whether what we promote—student originality in writing and research—corresponds to the scope and value of the work assigned, as frequently pieces of writing that are not deemed valuable may become opportunities for simpler routes to “authorship”—i.e., the purchased paper.

Composition studies scholars have focused on these latter stages of the composing process, in which students come to terms with the relevance of research to their own college careers and the ensuing identity building that is negotiated in this process, namely while “dialoguing” with outside sources. Elaine Whitaker, in “A Pedagogy to Address Plagiarism,” approaches academic dishonesty in the first-year writing course by taking students through published documents and asking them to dissect and interpret the information found there in order to “analyz[e] where one’s own position falls with respect to the positions of others” (509). Whitaker asserts that students are taught to believe that “the ideas of authorities are preferable to their own ideas” and, as a result, are likely to be confused about how to achieve “personal mastery of information” (509). Integrating student conceptions of the authority of sources into discussions of work such as Whitaker’s may be valuable in examining whether students ever do “enter a conversation,” as many teachers put it, with published sources. As my students’ observations show, however, the question may not be whether we can adequately explain to students *how* to use sources, but if we can ever explain *why* students should bother to credit sources at all—why the sources themselves are even *valuable* as other-authored texts.

As one of my students, “Peter,” explains, research and the act of researching sources is meaningless for some, eclipsing the regard one may or may not have for the original source material itself. Peter posits that research vis-à-vis

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online paper-mill sites then plays on this perception about research, given that “mastery” is further problematized by the currency and availability of source information in the eyes of some students:

Looking at papers from these sites (according to the sites) is no different from reviewing a secondary source of some more prestigious author. Cheater.com claims that its primary purpose was to ‘originally wipe out the standard library’ under the rationale that ‘Most libraries carry books that are outdated and the information cannot be used anymore.’ As far-fetched as that seems, this does have some validity. Depending upon what a student is studying, some libraries may be somewhat out of date. Researching more modern topics may lead to sources outside of libraries, thus reading other people’s papers might be a necessary means to achieve one’s end. (“Who Says Cheating is Bad?” 3)

The idea of authority and experience may be at risk so long as students are taught from generation to generation that original authorship does not matter. These students have no concept of “mastering” sources when they are instructed to use sources only as a means of double-checking the work of others, or shoring up an incomplete paper acquired from another source, namely the paper mills. My student “Elizabeth” questions this growing practice:

I talked to a graduate student, who told me that in his sophomore year, he once ordered a paper from Research-Assistance.com, and when he received the paper, he said there were many little mistakes, like misspelling and grammar. The paper came with a free bibliography, so he went back and looked over a few books. He corrected the paper and handed it in. When asked what kind of grade he received, he said, “It was worth it. I got a B and did half the work.” Do teachers and professors want students to do half of the work? Should they then receive half of the credit? (“Is the Internet a Great Information System for Students?” 4)

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In Elizabeth’s narrative, another allied point about “collaboration” arises that the paper mills certainly play upon—the notion that their papers are indeed “source material” in themselves.

This student followed the prescribed route for using the purchased paper, according to Research-Assistance.com: he used the paper as a “first draft” for the final product, securing an above-average grade for what really only constituted editing an incomplete work authored by another. While Elizabeth herself was not impressed by this effort, other students undoubtedly would see it as a reasonable way to complete a writing assignment. The implication is that the student went to the library *just* to look at the

sources from the purchased paper and “check” the work, not to research the sources and learn from them independently. In this way, the student acted as many students suspect teachers do: as a “fact checker,” not a real reader of the work, or of the research. The paper becomes a product with distinct attributes of “correctness” irrespective of its intellectual value or academic quality; this perception, of course, perpetuates the myth among composition students that “good” writing is nothing more than clean prose which may or may not be intellectually engaging.

Exacerbating this juxtaposition of students versus sources, and the complex rules by which students incorporate and value the words and ideas of others in their writing, are teachers in the humanities—many if not all among us—who have contributed to the idea that the author is not a student, or even a “regular” person, but an entity to be studied at arm’s length, historicized for the college curriculum. English studies tends to emphasize in its literature courses the importance of a great number of deceased canonical authors; these authors, for example Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, rise to a near-mythic status in high school, and subsequently college, curricula. Students are left to believe that authorship is connected to fame and not accessible to the lowly student, who is only good enough to *study* these authors from afar. In this case, the recognized person-product is the marker of authorship. As Margaret Price points out in her call for a revision of plagiarism policy so as to consider the various *contexts* in which a piece of writing is produced, this person-product concept is key to academia’s heralding of the historical author and his or her moment of creation, in that sometimes there exists “the issue of whether authors create texts or whether, perhaps, it is the other way around” (94).

**English studies tends to emphasize in its literature courses the importance of a great number of deceased canonical authors; these authors, for example Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, rise to a near-mythic status.**

Do our composition students understand this concept of authorship too *narrowly*, so that they might only see an “author” as this sort of published or publicized person, from whom only to cite, borrow, or, in this case, purchase existing, successful work? Do these students believe that authorship comes as a complete package that is at once “creative” and economically attractive to others—neither of which attributes is available to those completing routine writing assignments for college courses? Perhaps this conception of authorship exists among many first-year writers because the authoring we ask them

to engage in is in the service of a product that they see as neither attractive nor valuable. As my student “Mike” argues,

School work isn't looked at as something to help you learn and progress. It is more time-consuming if anything. Work is boring, and unpopular, which [creates] negative attitudes. The negative attitudes lead students on to the Internet, ready to get the assignment done by any means necessary. Students praise these Web sites, and gloat over them because they are the easy way out and call for no effort. (“Papers for Sale” 5)

As a way of examining this perception among students that class work is without value in the “real” world, Horner warns that the reification of student writing as “fixed object” allows “the work produced in the classroom [. . .] to be seen as no more than preparatory ‘practice’ for meeting the demands of a world somehow more real yet outside the classroom and so outside of the control of those within it” (512). A necessary valuation of the student as academic author, and of the assignment as *real* writing, integral to the student’s understanding of his or her own authorship, is thus one initial step in combating the popularity of online paper mills and avoiding what Howard terms “a qualitative hierarchy” of authorship, calculating “who is best and who is worst” (*Standing* 41). Students are employing that scale as they comb the Internet, finding whole papers for sale that seem to be sold to them as the “best” as compared to their own “worst” attempts at authorship.

## II. Everything’s for Sale: Academia Meets Consumer Culture Online

When papers with absent authors are sold online, certainly students and professors agree that this is plagiarism in academia’s eyes. However, the idea of ownership versus authorship when determining ethical use of a paper, especially a purchased one, is less clear in many students’ minds, even as faculty understand—or profess to understand—what it means to create an “original” and *quality* text to “own” as an author. In my own discussions of teaching materials and research findings with colleagues, particularly those new to the teaching of first-year composition, I often hear queries such as “Can I *steal* that assignment?” or “Do you think I could use that syllabus as a *model* (or a *template*)?” In creative-writing courses, teachers often encourage students to “*mimic*” canonical authors so as to internalize traditional styles and to understand the value of voice and poetic form. These are only select examples of how the creative, collaborative notion of intellectual production in the humani-

ties often leads to “borrowing” ideas back and forth, between complicit and entirely well-meaning individuals.

Certainly in other disciplines outside English studies, such as music, students understand the widespread use of electronic *sampling* as a homage to other artists, with such samples melded seamlessly into one’s own work in the studio. Sanjek questions whether “anyone with an available library of recordings, a grasp of recorded musical history, and a talent for ingenious collage can call themselves a creator of music, [and if so] is it the case that the process and the product no longer possess the meanings once assigned them?” (345). Martha Woodmansee more broadly argues that the “economic model” governing copyright “justifies protection only insofar as it promotes social welfare by providing an incentive to create and/or distribute new works” and builds upon the “natural law model,” in which copyright merely confirms a preexisting entitlement to authorship (5). How many of these words and supporting legal concepts are then retranslated in a different context, or with differing impetus, when a student seeks to complete a paper assignment but can’t quite seem to do it “right”? Even when students understand that taking the intellectual and artistic property of others is *wrong*, they might not clearly understand why it is wrong when said product is for *sale* on the Internet. When students then make that final leap, as part of a consumer culture, to see writing as a “product” designed to fulfill a distinct purpose in a college course, how far must those students leap to arrive at the conclusion that, like many other items in our culture offered online for sale, this product, too, can be bought?

**Economic precedents for the commerce of writing, built upon existent writing-for-hire conditions in our larger culture, complicate notions of authorship.**

Economic precedents for the commerce of writing, built upon existent writing-for-hire conditions in our larger culture, complicate notions of authorship. If a student logs on to an online paper mill and buys a paper that was put there by another student or *paid* contributor, thereby entering into a *business transaction* agreed upon by both parties, the consumer-minded student, unable to distinguish authorship from ownership, might wonder where the “stealing” is in this transaction. Consider taking this logic even further: a student who appropriates a published online article or similar piece of writing available on the Web without that author’s permission is indeed both “cheating” and “stealing” because he or she seeks to defraud both his or her audience and the author who originally wrote and posted the work. But a student who buys a paper with the author’s permission has *stolen* nothing; he or she has appro-

priated another's authorship for academically dishonest ends—with the express permission (via payment received) of the author herself, or the agency (paper mill) representing that author.

This logic obviously conflicts with attitudes in academia regarding authorship as an intellectual activity. As Alice Roy points out in her investigation of faculty attitudes toward plagiarism, often the definitions include “taking something that belongs to someone else,” and “making something seem like your own” (58–59). But she also argues that the idea of the “fixed, immutable text” makes certain questions prudent in a broader discussion of plagiarism, including “Where is the text? Who's got it? Whom does it represent?” and, very important, “Who controls it?” (56). She goes on to argue that “plagiarism assumes the concreteness of texts, the reality of authorship [. . .]” (56). Underlying the faculty definitions of plagiarism is a clear sense of when it is “wrong” to take someone else's work: when one is working within the intellectual perimeters of academia, which values authorship. Students, however, in their quest to see college as an economic and “practical” (which here serves as the antithesis of “intellectual”) enterprise, do not envision “authenticity” as a prioritized term of their discourse.

Andrea Lunsford and Susan West recognize this student discourse as they approach the issue of writing-for-sale in the context of a larger argument about intellectual property, and the risk posed to research and inquiry by proposed laws governing copyright and ownership of ideas. In their article “Intellectual Property and Composition Studies,” Lunsford and West question the long-term implications of recent copyright infringement suits, even under “fair use” educational purposes (384–85). They specifically interrogate the acceptance of “possessive ownership as normal” and the way in which this idea leads to “student adherence to an increasingly strong protectionist view of copyright” while it “hinder[s] educators' use of the Internet to pique student curiosity and blunt[s] its value as a research tool for everyone” (386). Lunsford and West are arguing that such government regulation of text “ownership” will limit students' and teachers' ability to engage in dialogue with sources in their own scholarship.

But Lunsford and West also acknowledge the dangerous messages that this sort of legislation would send to composition students in particular, as these students, new to academic discourse, must consider who “owns” ideas and from whom one can *acquire* ideas in a commercial rather than intellectual exchange. They argue such legislation demonstrates that the proposition that

language can be owned, cordoned off and protected from trespassers, *bought and sold like parcels of real estate*—whether by an autonomous and stable Romantic author/genius or by a multinational corporate author/surrogate who claims the absolute right to control of dissemination and use—must be scrutinized by teachers of writing everywhere. (390, emphasis added)

When we apply this hypothesis to the online paper mills, clearly the “multinational corporate author/surrogate,” the agents who are selling papers “like parcels of real estate,” are the paper-mill companies, which indeed “claim the absolute right” over the *original* author of the paper-for-sale, as examined earlier here via the Paper Store and Lori Mohr-Corrigan. Mohr-Corrigan serves as a “work for hire” author in Lunsford and West’s terms, much as they argue that English studies scholars must sell their work to journals in the form of copyright (390).

Surprisingly, while Lunsford and West make a direct connection between their ideas about intellectual property and the online term-paper mills, they do not extend this point beyond a mention near the close of their article. They acknowledge that “[t]erm paper mills (now available on the Web) have for many years been a thriving cottage industry [. . .] [S]tudents buy academic essays in much the same way they would purchase a chair [. . .] as something they have paid ‘good money’ for and can now call their own” (399). The argument here, with which I strongly agree, is that as our culture increasingly privileges the property values of texts—including, perhaps, that which is bought and sold under unethical circumstances—our students will increasingly see their own writing and the writing of others as nothing more than a commodity itself. This is the critical point in our students’ lives which we must study further: the point at which the academic concept of authorship—as well as the everyday practice of authoring one’s own words and valuing that process—is negated, and the economic concept of papers-for-sale takes hold.

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Because our current culture has constructed authorship in economic terms, our students are not as troubled about the consequences of their paper-mill patronage as are the faculty who assign the work for which papers are purchased. In 1988, Thomas Moore reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that the University of Southern California, in order to combat the local paper-mill industry on campus, stated that advertisements in the student news-

paper for “research assistance” were not allowed “to use the words writing, editing, research, assistance or proofreading in their ads” (36). In 2001, Jeffrey Young reports, also in the *Chronicle*, that USC is now one of many universities beginning to focus on detection methods, becoming a patron of Turnitin.com and joining the faculty who say that “checking papers for cheating may soon become a routine part of grading” (A26). This perverts Lunsford and West’s idea of “communicating in an electronic environment as a social activity, as the necessarily collaborative process of creating and consuming information [ . . . ]” (395).

These faculty obviously fear the clear and rising tide of plagiarism, such as that noted in the *New York Times* by Mark Edmunson, who cites a recent study conducted by Donald McCabe of eighteen thousand students nationwide showing that “38 percent of the students polled had committed ‘cut and paste’ plagiarism [ . . . ]. Forty percent of respondents admitted to copying without attribution from written sources. [ . . . ] In the last such survey, taken three years ago, only 10 percent of students admitted to cheating” (A29). But faculty who believe that utilizing Internet-based services such as Turnitin.com is a good use of one’s time may be further compromising or even significantly altering their own pedagogy in favor of entering a lose-lose electronic universe. In addition to risking their own breaches of ethics,<sup>3</sup> these faculty may be engaging in a process that mimics a dog chasing its tail, as Internet-based plagiarism shows no sign of dissipating simply because of increased detection efforts or other internal deterrence systems.<sup>4</sup>

In my survey, for example, even though only 4 percent of all students reported that they have never known anyone who has cheated in school, for Question 4 (“In my opinion, it is acceptable for me to cheat in school if . . .”) 180 students, or 73 percent of those surveyed, also answered, paradoxically, “It is never acceptable for me to cheat.” These may be the students who allow cheating to go on around them but do not report it, or these may be the students who themselves cheat in private, under certain circumstances, but recognize internally that their behavior is inappropriate, even if it goes unreported or undetected. We may hypothesize that such students—those “morally” ashamed of their cheating but also compelled to cheat if the academic situation warrants it—are those who may be the most susceptible to the paper mills online. The anonymous purchasing power that these students have circumvents not only the authority of the teacher and assignment, but also the ability of the student’s friends to detect and report such behavior, and by extension

the student's need to rely on others known to him or her (getting answers to a test, borrowing a previously written "A" paper) for the act of academic dishonesty.

Students are not only internally conflicted about what constitutes cheating, and whether it is acceptable to police one's peers in the service of agreed-upon ethical academic standards; they are also clearly sent mixed messages from our consumer culture about what is acceptable to download, purchase, or appropriate. That being the case, it seems naïve to think that Internet-based cheating, including online paper-mill patronage, will disappear if only we as faculty become technologically "smart" about cheating, or continue dismissing the patronage of online paper mills as an extreme act of academic dishonesty that lies outside authorship or intellectual property discussions altogether. As Steve Lohr argues in the *New York Times*, "[T]oday's global network had its origins in the research culture of academia with its ethos of freely sharing information" (1). We should pay attention to messages which originated in academia about the Internet, and which the online paper mills appropriate in their business-based discourse with students. These messages center on the ease of electronic information and the relative value of academic writing or "original" thought production inside this electronic universe.

**It seems naïve to think that Internet-based cheating, including online paper-mill patronage, will disappear if only we as faculty become technologically "smart" about cheating**

Our students continue to patronize paper mills, or engage in other academically dishonest acts, as they are neither interested in nor afraid of faculty or institutional detection methods rooted in such contradictory messages about intellectual property. These same students, however, *are* certainly interested in and persuaded by arguments put forth by the online paper mills. These are that college is a waste of time; that the written product (term paper, essay, research project) is indeed a *product* in economic terms, interchangeable by its owner and authored by none; and that in the Internet age, with a variety of resources available online for the trade and sale of the written product, the author is more than dead—he or she never even existed. The paper-for-sale floats in cyberspace like so many other products, on sites quite similar to those selling legitimate products to the same eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-old target demographic.

Michael Pemberton estimates that, based just on the number of customized papers purchased online per year (approximately sixteen thousand), in the course of a four- or five-year college degree one in 750 students will buy a

paper from an online paper mill (144–45). This number does not take into account the number of papers *previously written and on file* with the paper mill companies, written on “stock” topics (from common literature assignments such as Shakespeare’s plays to more general social topics frequently debated, such as gun control). So the total number of students is undoubtedly many times higher than this one-in-750 estimate, even if the profile of the sites themselves is low by comparison. The companies are operating for all intents and purposes anonymously (try finding the webmaster’s name for any of the paper-mill sites) but with the bravado of a high-profile corporation, as they hoodwink their customers into believing that cheating is “OK” for a variety of reasons. These include blaming professors for not creating new writing assignments; blaming universities for assigning too much work, which students cannot complete without “help”; blaming the overall economic structure of the country for requiring students to be “well-rounded” in various careers, which leads universities to offer needless general education courses, for which they do not have time to write papers, for which professors hand out the same assignments again and again . . . you get the idea.

And this is exactly the rhetoric we use in our professional discussions of plagiarism and paper mills: we should write original, compelling assignments so that they won’t be recycled; we should be sensitive to student pressures and stress when we assign work; we should think carefully about our general education requirements and work to “streamline” courses for budget needs as well as student interests. It is shocking to think that perhaps the instructors and the paper-mill proprietors are having the same discussion; the difference is

**An examination of the paper-mill sites reveals that their commerce with students is built upon longstanding student suspicions of how much writing is ultimately valued in an academic setting.**

that the paper mills are using this reasoning to make money on student fears and insecurities related to writing in college. Paper mills run on this rhetoric of blame, and in the process convince students that paying just a little—or maybe a lot—for a product that they really *deserve* to have, that will never be detected by this

thoughtless, careless system, is not only acceptable but the standard means by which one completes a college degree. This is a powerful package that our students buy into.

An examination of the paper-mill sites reveals that their commerce with students is built upon longstanding student suspicions of how much writing is ultimately valued in an academic setting. For example, the rationale on

SwapTermpapers.com, just one of several sites allowing students to trade in essays of their own for other essays from the company free of charge (and also enabling those unfortunates without an essay for trade to purchase one from the database instead) is: “Every student has written term papers, essays and book reports that are lying around without any value. *We put value on your work!*” (“About Us”). The message being sent here is that only students can be trusted to make college work ultimately valuable, since the primary long-term function of academic work is to collect dust—as papers even as we speak are “lying around” the house, serving no *real* purpose once class is finished.

Another point of argument on the sites, drawing from student perceptions of the value of their own work, is that paper mills serve as deserved “assistance” in writing, a substitute for the tedious task of actual learning via research, in the absence of caring, dedicated teachers. This declaration is put forward as “true” in purpose, even while the sites, in their graphics and visual design, privately wink at the students regarding the falsity of this claim. As my student “Steven” points out in regards to the disclaimer on Termpapers-on-file.com,

**The paper-mill sites position themselves as sources of assistance, support, and reliability for students facing academic distress.**

“The intended purpose of our term papers is that they be used as models to assist you in the preparation of your own work” . . . this statement is in contrast with the images on the first page of the site. The first represents a student sitting on a desk and three huge piles of books surrounding him. The other image represents a [man] sitting in front of a personal computer without knowing what to write. One could infer that these images are trying to [say]: “Why study and be desperate when I could find my essays [here instead]?” (“Online Paper Mills” 3)

My student “Jill” also visited Termpapers-on-file.com and observed a similar message:

Take the man on the computer, for example, who is not doing his work. This shows us that it’s OK to not be able to do your homework; maybe you’ve tried like this man, but have had no success. If so, that’s why we’re here, to help with your paper! Then there’s the man at the desk with piles of papers [. . .]. This tells (the Web site’s) audience, “We understand that you have so much other work to do, and if you don’t have the time . . . *you can always turn to us.*” (“Can Paper Mill Web Sites Be So Persuasive as to Make People Change Their Morals?” 3, emphasis added)

As Jill emphasizes, the paper-mill sites position themselves as sources of assistance, support, and reliability for students facing academic distress. Their car-

ing outreach to students sounds like any other consumer-driven business seeking a loyal customer base; in the case of paper mills, that customer base is made up of insecure, desperate student writers who do not feel their original ideas are good enough for the grades and course credits they hope to accumulate.

Amazingly, some paper-mill sites interrogate this very idea of doing “original” work in their online discourse, highlighting their “authentic” research papers as smart alternatives not only to doing one’s own work, but also to the temptation of “cut-and-paste” that leads to less *professional, legitimate* papers. This ironic claim is likely in response to the proliferation of scholarship on and news coverage of the spread of Internet plagiarism, specifically cut-and-paste work that sites such as Turnitin.com seek to detect. One site, Authentic Essays.com, seeks to persuade students of the quality and “authenticity” of its work:

Authentic is more than a word for us. When you order custom essays from Authentic Essays, you can be 100 percent sure that you will receive a *truly authentic work*—we do provide refunds if our customers find even a couple of sentences in the paper ordered that came word for word from some outside source without giving proper references [ . . . ].

Customer satisfaction is our primary goal [ . . . ] *thus superior quality is something you can always count on* when you buy essays from us. Besides providing you with a money back guarantee in case you detect *copy pasted material* in your paper, we have prepared more treats for our clients. If you like the quality of our custom writing service, we have a lot of special offers and discounts, which means that *our customers can save money* ordering their custom written essays from Authentic Essays.

Besides, we can help even in the most critical situation—our staff writers are able to complete your paper within 12 hours if needed. (emphasis added)

Obviously, myriad consumerist messages abound in this statement. First, the site speaks to students’ fears of “quality”—a legitimate question when patronizing the paper mills. It assures “superior quality,” presumably as opposed to other paper-mill sites that let the consumers/students down in this regard. Second, the site appeals to the “good bargain” of buying a paper online—emphasizing that “customers can save money” through special offers and discounts that come from *repeat* patronage of the site; this appeal alone points to the suspicion among faculty that once a student buys a paper, he or she is “hooked” until the point of detection/punishment occurs—if it ever does. Finally, Authentic Essays offers immediate, time-sensitive help with assignments;

in other words, not only can students buy from this site, they can do so at the last minute—for example, the night before the assignment is due.

But the most disturbing message sent here that links customer satisfaction with academic notions of authorship is the initial claim for which the Web site is named—that the work is “authentic” and that *refunds* are provided if “even a couple of sentences” in the paper are “word for word” from another source. What does this communicate to students about wholesale plagiarism versus other types of “cheating” that are more easily detectable, and more readily discussed in our student handbooks, our course syllabi, and in our culture’s popular presses? Clearly the distinction here is made between whole, “legitimate” authorship—by a paid individual working for AuthenticEssays.com—and “illegitimate” authorship—that which comes from using sources *word for word inside* the purchased paper, an ironic turn on concepts of “intentional” and “unintentional” plagiarism. On this site, the company slogans that appear at the top of the page (alongside a happy snowboarder sailing high above the text) are “Live life while we work” and “Let professionals do your paper.” These alluring slogans stem from two common feelings among students—that “life” is different from “work” (and school), and that “professionals” are the preferred source for paper-writing; students aren’t even part of the writing equation.

Geniuspapers.com takes this notion of “professional” authorship-for-hire one step further by pointing out on the front page of its Web site just how often its work has appeared in public discourse. This is most likely discourse related to plagiarism, but note how that key detail is omitted here for the student audience. The text reads:

For over seven years, Genius Papers has been one of the biggest and most comprehensive research companies on the Web. Not only have we been featured in more publications, conferences, and educational briefings than virtually any other paper assistance service in existence, we have also been included within the top ten term paper and book report listings of just about every major search engine on the Internet.

Genius Papers additionally claims to have been “featured” in popular news publications such as the *Seattle Times* and the *Washington Post* and on channels such as *CNN*. The sly visual organization of the site lists these publications and corporations on the sidebar, making them appear as *sponsors* would on other Web sites backed by “legitimate” companies. Again, the language of commerce justifies the antiacademic product of the site, custom-written papers for sale.

As most students will not know what “publications, conferences, and educational briefings” mean in the context of current research into academic dishonesty, the proud claim here implies that the services of Genius Papers are so valuable that “educational briefings” somehow *emphasize* the quality of the company’s service. Genius Papers claims to be cited more than “any other paper assistance service in existence” and is “within the top ten term paper” listings available on the Internet. The appeal here is to notions of authority—why use other paper-mill companies when this one is the “best” (or so it claims)? Why use other companies when this one is part of myriad “conferences” that highlight its services? Genius Papers obviously wants to rise above its own competition—and its competition is vast.<sup>5</sup> But it also wants to appeal to student customers to see its services as *legitimate*, unlike others, again equating “quality” and legitimacy—a word antithetical to plagiarism. It is a tricky enthymeme that Genius Papers ultimately employs: “Publications, conferences, and educational briefings” are where “legitimate” teachers and scholars work; a degree is for gaining legitimacy; Genius Papers is cited in these legitimate settings; therefore, Genius Papers will make students successful in the “legitimate” work world, because students alone cannot do this in their own writing.

At no point, however, does Genius Papers acknowledge that co-opting one of its “original” papers might constitute plagiarism as well. This omission is addressed in one of my student’s observations about the rise of online paper mills in general. “Ted” states:

The Web sites I visited appeared to have no problem what so ever with the fact that the function of their existence is fundamentally wrong, dishonest, and morally unjust. In addition, they don’t give any warnings as to what their visitors are getting into, what the repercussions are for acting on the notion to use their Web site, nor that what they are doing is illegal. It’s obvious that these Web sites are aware that lack of integrity and deviant behavior are dominant in society today, and they are soaking in all the advantages of it. (“Going Against the Wind” 5)

If our students understand these powerful con games which play upon our consumer culture, why are we waiting to see whether they will enter the game? If we start talking with our students about the *value* of writing, and the writing process, and start attending in our research to the persuasive power of the paper mills that devalue this process, we might indeed, in Horner’s terms, begin the difficult yet necessary *intellectual* journey of “joining with our students to investigate writing as social and material practice” (526).

### III. Conclusion: Ask the Author(s)

Ed White, in “Student Plagiarism as an Institutional and Social Issue,” warns:

The response to theft cannot be merely individual [. . .]. Indeed, we should all expect that much plagiarism will naturally occur unless we help students understand what all the fuss is about; many students simply are clueless about the issue and many faculty think the issue is simpler than it is. Taking moral high ground is important and necessary, but, as with other moral issues, too many of the statements from that ground are hypocritical and not cognizant of the complex motives behind student actions. (207)

White makes it clear that we must combat plagiarism from two sides, “prevention through education as well as punishment for violations” (206). He believes that things will never change unless we help to change them by *educating* the “violators,” our students. Like White, I am not against punishment, nor do I believe that it alone will stop plagiarism, or that punishment, for some, teaches any long-term lessons. Those who do not *want* to learn how authorship builds and validates a writer’s identity will find ways *not* to listen. Thus, while I agree with Woodmansee’s astute observation that “authorship does not exist to innocent eyes; they see only writing and texts” (1), I also recognize that some students—including a few of my own—will remain willfully “innocent” unless, until, and sometimes in spite of having been proven “guilty.”

Ultimately, I believe that what we have been doing thus far, particularly where online paper mills are concerned, is *not working*. We *do* have to take note of the now-slippery state of authorship vis-à-vis the expanding Internet, and be diligent about teaching our students that plagiarism is wrong and that academic ethics mean something. But let us not use the exponential—and seemingly unstoppable—growth power of online paper mills as an excuse to give up on the idea of *singular student authorship* altogether; let us instead take this opportunity to revisit theories of authorship with our students and reinforce the value of the writer-author. While cheating may arise from a complicated notion of personal worth and academic (in)ability, the purchase of essays from online companies strikes an even more basic chord in our students: the power to purchase this worth and ability, and by extension a new academic identity.

**Let us . . . take this opportunity to revisit theories of authorship with our students and reinforce the value of the writer-author.**

We should continue, in our battle against plagiarism, to see the composition classroom as a site for “responsible writing and learning” (White 210) on the part of teachers and students alike. Instead of further sublimating the

**Students and teachers should work to find a way, together, to shape how the ethics of the writing classroom, and the larger university, should operate.**

author ourselves, we should work to solidify our students' ideas of authorship, and their identities as writers, so that if—or when—they visit an online paper mill, they will not be persuaded to erase their writing identity in favor of a good academic bargain. Students and teachers should work to find a way, together, to shape

how the ethics of the writing classroom, and the larger university, should operate: not like a business, and not in the service of economics.

### **Appendix: Survey of Student Opinions on Academic Dishonesty in English 101**

Please answer the following questions honestly. Your answers will become part of a study focusing on how students conceive of academic honesty, and how these conceptions affect college professors who teach research-based writing.

Please circle *as many answers as are applicable* to your response for each question.

Please use *“other”* if available to provide an answer that is not listed below.

*Do not put your name on this survey*, as all survey responses will be kept anonymous.

1. When I hear the word “cheating” I think of:
  - a. Copying answers from another student during an exam or in-class work (238; 96 percent)
  - b. Copying lecture notes from another student when I have missed class, then using those notes in a paper or on an exam (27; 11 percent)
  - c. Getting help outside of class from another student when writing a paper or take-home exam (30; 12 percent)
  - d. Asking another student or a friend to write a paper for me (194; 79 percent)
  - e. Buying a paper from an outside source, either a company or an individual (204; 83 percent)
  - f. Taking source material from the Internet and using it as my own in a paper or take-home exam (175; 71 percent)
  - g. Taking source material from books, magazines, or journals and using it as my own in a paper or take-home exam (169; 68 percent)
  - h. Using a professor’s lecture material as my own in a paper or take-home exam without naming my professor as a source (131; 53 percent)
    - i. Bringing notes to a closed-book, in-class examination (180; 73 percent)
    - j. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ (12; 5 percent)
2. In my experience, students I have known who have cheated in school have:
  - a. Always been caught and punished by the teacher or professor (8; 3 percent)
  - b. Always been caught and punished by someone outside the school (such as a parent) (4; 2 percent)
  - c. Sometimes been caught and punished by the teacher or professor (97; 39 percent)

- d. Sometimes been caught and punished by someone outside the school (31; 13 percent)
  - e. Seldom been caught or punished by the teacher or professor (126; 51 percent)
  - f. Seldom been caught or punished by someone outside the school (38; 15 percent)
  - g. Never been caught or punished by the teacher or professor (54; 22 percent)
  - h. Never been caught or punished by anyone outside of school (55; 22 percent)
  - i. I have never known anyone who has cheated in school (10; 4 percent)
3. The typical punishment for students I have known who have cheated has been:
- a. Failure of the paper or exam for which the cheating was done (206; 83 percent)
  - b. Failure in the course in which the cheating was done (44; 18 percent)
  - c. Higher disciplinary action (such as academic probation) or expulsion from school (34; 14 percent)
  - d. No punishment, but the student has dropped the class or has dropped out of school (6; 2 percent)
  - e. No punishment at all; no consequences for the student (31; 13 percent)
4. In my opinion, it is acceptable for me to cheat in school if:
- a. I am short on time and the assignment is due; if I don't cheat, I won't finish the work (24; 10 percent)
  - b. I am under other personal stresses (such as relationship or family problems) that keep me from doing the work on my own (27; 11 percent)
  - c. I am confused about the subject and can't do the work well on my own (32; 13 percent)
  - d. I am uninterested in the subject and don't care if I do the work well, or if I do it myself (18; 7 percent)
  - e. I will be punished by my parents or other authority if I do this work poorly (16; 6 percent)
  - f. It is never acceptable for me to cheat (180; 73 percent)
  - g. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ (10; 4 percent)
5. To me, being an "author" means:
- a. Writing a book or academic article (157; 64 percent)
  - b. Writing anything, whether it is "academic" or not, that is then published (150; 61 percent)
  - c. Writing anything, whether it is "academic" or not, and whether it is published or not (144; 58 percent)
  - d. Writing material for the Internet (either a personal or business Web site) (96; 39 percent)
  - e. Writing a paper or a project for a college course (86; 35 percent)
  - f. Writing something for which one may become famous or well-known (112; 45 percent)
  - g. Co-writing a project of any kind with another person or persons (87; 35 percent)
  - h. Gathering different sources and pasting them together as a collection of writing, then putting your name on that collection (16; 6 percent)

- i. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ (8; 3 percent)
6. Most of the papers I have written for college courses could best be defined as:
- Material that has no use outside the particular course or area of study (82; 33 percent)
  - Material that may be used in other situations, such as a job or professional applications (63; 26 percent)
  - Material that represents who I am as a writer (110; 45 percent)
  - Material that in no way represents who I am as a writer (28; 11 percent)
  - Material that has required extensive research (84; 34 percent)
  - Material that has required moderate research (146; 59 percent)
  - Material that has required little to no research (45; 18 percent)
7. I would define "research" done for college papers as:
- Going to the library and finding books and journal articles to use in my paper (214; 87 percent)
  - Going to a resource of some kind and learning more about a subject for my paper (172; 70 percent)
  - Going to the Internet and downloading any and all information that I can use in a paper (158; 64 percent)
  - Going to friends, family, or other persons and getting ideas or suggestions to use in my paper (129; 52 percent)
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ (9; 4 percent)
8. My opinion about the overall function or use of the Internet in college research is:
- It is a very necessary and beneficial component of my research for college writing projects (132; 53 percent)
  - It is a somewhat necessary and beneficial component of my research for college writing projects (64; 26 percent)
  - It is an option for research in college writing projects; sometimes I use the Internet, sometimes I don't (109; 44 percent)
  - It is not an option for me, either because I don't have Internet access or don't like using the Internet (18; 7 percent)
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ (11; 4 percent)

Tallied results = (number of responses; percentage of total)

Total number of students surveyed = 247

## Notes

1. Some online paper mill companies actually are predicated upon the notion that students are comfortable with erasing their identities, even in the specific writing occasion for which "identity" and its trappings counts the most. As Kelly McCollum reports in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, IvyEssays sells preexisting, successful admissions essays from Ivy-League students to paying Internet clients. While the

company stresses that it is “not interested in helping students plagiarize” and also sells tailored essays that fit the students’ interests or goals (A25), the temptation to instead select an already proven successful admission essay, particularly for those students wishing to gain entry to a top school, is obvious. This is an instance of complete identity erasure perpetrated by those who advertise authorship for sale to students who have already devalued their ability to “own” their own texts through authorship.

2. It is important to recall that students were allowed throughout the survey to circle one or more responses to each question; for this question focused on being an author, multiple responses were the norm, with each student circling on average four of the options listed.

3. In her May 2002 *Chronicle* piece, Andrea Foster argues that services such as Turnitin.com, which keep submitted papers in a large database for future faculty reference, may infringe on students’ own copyrights, particularly when done without the students’ knowledge or consent (A37). She also cites Howard as an “outspoken critic” of the detection service, and indicates that Howard believes that the service may also violate students’ FERPA (Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act) rights (A38). As of May 2004, at least one student in Canada has initiated a lawsuit against Turnitin.com, contesting the inclusion of his academic paper in the company’s database.

4. At some colleges and universities, institutional measurements are in place designed to combat plagiarism by means of specifically internal, tougher punishments based on peer reporting and/or institutional honor codes. Studies have shown, however, that these more progressive peer-based measures involving self-policing may not curb cheating, even if they raise awareness of individual acts of academic dishonesty. These measures are of the greatest relevance to a study of paper-mill usage and related acts of plagiarism, since this sort of cheating may take place without peer complicity (i.e., allowing a friend to see answers in an exam) but with peer awareness (those who know a friend had purchased or downloaded his or her paper). Donald McCabe, Linda Klebe Trevino, and Kenneth D. Butterfield studied the influence of academic honor codes and peer reporting among college students, and determined that while students who attend institutions that have some sort of honor code in place along with peer reporting are afforded a great deal of trust and freedom, these same students react negatively to the notion that they must report on their fellow students, and “find reasons why it is not appropriate to report peer cheating” (42). Reasons range from the student feeling it is “none of [his or her] business” to a feeling that the penalties for cheating are “too severe” or the risk of being ostracized by one’s friends if a report is filed (42).

5. The helpful, often-cited Georgetown University plagiarism/academic dishonesty Web site, <http://www.georgetown.edu/honor/plagiarism.html>, offered a com-

prehensive list, upon which I built my research and the list of Web sites that my students analyzed in their English 101 papers.. See Margaret Fain and Peggy Bates's page at Coastal Carolina University (<http://www.coastal.edu/library/presentations/papermil.html>) for a more recent and extremely comprehensive listing of the paper mill sites operating online, including many that now offer papers for *trade* as well as sale or resale, for example SwapTermpapers.com. This system is particularly interesting in that the financial aspect of the paper mill is waived in favor of a kind of barter system that gives paper for paper, author for author, again without a sense of "stealing" work of any kind, although surely the overall commerce of the site is funded by company sponsorship, "membership" fees, and the continual purchase of papers by students without papers to trade. As the company puts it, theirs is a site "by students, for students, and with students."

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