Viewpoints & Discussion:

Response to White's 'Shadow Scholars and the Rise of the Dissertation Service Industry'

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Abstract

The consideration of the impact of the dissertation services industry on the academy is a welcome piece by Jeffry L. White. White raises interesting questions and calls on educators and researchers to think deeply about the role they play in encouraging or combating the use of this industry by graduate students. In this piece, I respond to White's viewpoint by arguing that stronger language is needed to define this industry and that programs and institutions must be more clear and transparent about their definitions of contract cheating and what kind of assistance they allow their graduate students to use in the writing of their dissertations or theses.

Index Terms: ethics; cheating; dissertations

Jeffry L. White's (2016) article titled "Shadow Scholars and the Rise of the Dissertation Service Industry" seeks to raise awareness about graduate student use of "consultants" to complete their dissertations or theses. White reviews the scope of what he calls the "consulting services" industry, opines on the impact such an industry may have on the quality and integrity of graduate programs, and suggests some remedies that may exist for combating any negative impact. White ends his piece with some interesting questions for deliberation that ask for personal experiences with these "services," what graduate

programs and institutions are or could be doing about this practice, and what "policies and practices" academic journals have in place to deal with ghostwriting.

All of these are interesting questions to explore. In my response, I aim to address some of them (particularly around programmatic and institutional practices and policies), but first I will argue for a reframing of the issue at hand.

After 14 years studying, researching and writing about academic integrity, and 10 years of managing an academic integrity unit within a major research university, I am convinced that the language we use shapes the reality we are experiencing. In my 2008 book, *Academic Integrity in the Twenty-First Century: A Teaching and Learning Imperative* (Bertram Gallant, 2008), I argued that the "moral panic" over student cheating was not helping to make cheating the exception and integrity the norm. I still believe that to be true for many reasons. A moral panic about "cheaters" creates a victim-perpetrator relationship between us (educators and administrators) and our students, discouraging us to reflect on our role in the situation and what we could be doing differently to change things. The "moral panic" also belies the fact that human beings will cheat when given the opportunity, the right temptations, and the wrong environment (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Gino, Ayal, Ariely, 2009; Palmer, 2012). Thus, rather than rooting our academic integrity efforts in this moral panic, I argued that we need to view cheating as a teaching and learning issue, knowing that it can be reduced (and learning enhanced) by ethical classroom environments, good pedagogy, and well designed assessments. I have also argued that when cheating occurs, we must not panic but leverage it as a teachable moment about ethics, decision-making, and integrity (Bertram Gallant, 2015).

However, I must admit that in 2006-2007, when I was writing my 2008 book, I wasn't thinking about graduate students paying others to write their theses or dissertations. I was thinking about the tried and true cheating that has always occurred in education. A little bit of plagiarism here and there. An answer or two copied in an examination. Two students working together on what was to have been an individual assignment. This kind of cheating that is detrimental to education in the normative and over time, but not in its individual instances. In 2006-2007, I did not foresee the cheating industry explosion that was just over the horizon.

In 2016, my view is slightly different. Because language holds meaning and shapes viewpoints and actions, I now believe that a moral panic, and strong moral language, is necessary to deal with what I prefer to call the contract cheating industry. Clark and Lancaster (2007) coined the term *contract cheating* to refer to the action of having someone complete an academic work for another. The use of the term "cheating" here is very important because "ghostwriting" has become acceptable in our society. Politicians and other famous people who can't write, choose not to write, or don't have time to write (yet want to be considered an author), pay someone else to ghostwrite their work for them. For some reason (which I cannot define), our society finds this practice of lying about authorship to be morally acceptable. So, if we characterize students as hiring ghostwriters, it makes it sound more benign or acceptable than it actually is. Likewise, calling the contract cheating companies or providers as "paper mills," "services," or "consultants," normalizes and palliates the practice.

In some sense, even though I find the lying objectionable, there doesn't seem to be a call for a moral panic over people like Donald Trump using a ghostwriter. The ghostwriter isn't lied to (she signed a contract) and while the readers are, it is possible to assume that they enjoy the façade as long as they receive value for their money. That is to say that the context matters. In the context of education, the degrees our graduates earn are trusted by society to be artifacts, symbols of the knowledge and skills that the graduate possesses. The degrees are not the ends themselves, they merely signify that the actual ends—a certain level of competency (bachelors, masters, doctoral) in a certain discipline (e.g., math, biology, history)—was achieved. And inherently assumed within this achieved disciplinary competency are other competencies associated with obtaining a higher education degree—oral and written communication, interpersonal, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, reading, quantitative and information literacy, and ethical reasoning skills (Hart Research Associates, 2016). When a student receives a degree as a result of her submitting work that does not reflect her knowledge or her abilities, then the public is defrauded. As White noted, if graduate students are going to contract cheat through their graduate program, of course they are going to continue to do it as faculty, professionals and researchers. Why would they stop? Indeed, how could they stop when they do not have the time, skills, or inclination to produce their own work? In order to have integrity in the academy, the chain of events leading to the conferral of degrees must be a trustworthy, honest, fair, respectful, and responsible representation of the student's competencies. These are five of the six fundamental values of academic integrity, according to the International Center for Academic Integrity (2014). Therefore, the assessments themselves must have integrity, the student's work on those assessments must be an honest, fair and trustworthy representation of their knowledge and abilities, and the professor's evaluation has to be fair, honest and responsible. In today's knowledge economy, grades and degrees are currency and we must do everything we can to assure that they are not counterfeited.

So, to answer one of White's questions, how do we "insure the integrity of the [thesis/dissertation] process," I argue that we must first acknowledge and speak to the depth and scope of the contract cheating problem. We need to define for students (and the public) what behaviors constitute contract cheating and why it is morally reprehensible. We must be clear and transparent in these definitions because individuals, programs, and institutions have differing opinions on the matter. For example, because the dissertation is supposed to be an artifact of the doctoral student's ability to communicate about her research topic, I believe that having a dissertation edited by another is cheating (unless the true scope of the editing is made transparent). Yet, I know that dissertation editing is a common and growing phenomenon. Thus, the program or institution must define what is meant by contract cheating and they must make this definition publically available so that employers and others have a yardstick by which to judge the graduate's abilities. Along that line, institutions must require that graduate students disclose when they have used any services or help outside of the dissertation committee. This should not be a simple acknowledgement (e.g., "thank you to Tricia for editing my dissertation"), but a play-by-play accounting of what was changed/done by this external person. Perhaps, for example, students who use an editor must be required to submit their original drafts along with the tracked changes version from the editor. The dissertation committee could then decide if the student wrote a sufficient percentage of the dissertation to warrant a passing grade.

To be sure, institutions need to be doing much more to combat the scourge of contract cheating (see, e.g., Newton & Lang, 2015). In addition, our governments who fund education (either through financial aid or direct state support to public institutions) should start to feel a moral panic regarding the decline of education in a period of rampant commercialism. To that end, an international group of academics and practitioners have come together to create an institutional toolkit to combat contract cheating and a legislative template to help institutions and their government representatives work toward making contract cheating illegal in the United States and beyond. Both of these pieces will be released on October 19, 2016, on our International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating, in collaboration with Carnegie Council's Global Ethics Day. For more information and to download the materials, readers can go to http://contractcheating.weebly.com.

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