

Students' perceptions of plagiarism

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Abstract: While plagiarism by college students is a serious problem that must be addressed, students generally overestimate the frequency of plagiarism at their schools and blame students they do not know for the majority of incidents. This study looked at students' estimations of the frequency of plagiarism at a large urban college and explored how that varied over the full range of types of plagiarism, from using another author's ideas to submitting an entire document copied verbatim from another author's work. Analysis of student responses to survey items revealed they believe other students are far more likely than them to commit each type of plagiarism and they recognize that some types of plagiarism are more serious than others. The opportunity to reduce incidents of plagiarism by providing students with accurate information about plagiarism at their schools is discussed in the context of social norms theory.

Keywords: plagiarism, cheating, college, higher education, social norms theory

I. Introduction.

While plagiarism is a widespread problem, college instructors tend to overestimate its frequency (Hard, Conway, & Moran, 2006). Students also believe plagiarism occurs more often than it does, to an even greater extent than faculty, and they generally attribute the high rate of incidents to strangers rather than people they know or themselves (Engler, Landau, & Epstein, 2008).

It is important to understand students' beliefs about the frequency and nature of incidents of plagiarism at their schools. Even though students expect faculty to impose consequences for academic misconduct (Kuther, 2003; Brown, 2012), they also look to other students' behavior to determine how far they can push the boundaries of a professor's course policies (Feldman, 2001; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001; Hard et al., 2006; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009). Their opinion that some unidentified group of students at their school regularly submits work they did not do themselves can distort students' understandings of acceptable strategies they should use to complete assignments. Students who see some forms of plagiarism as less serious than others and who believe other students plagiarize frequently may become more likely to plagiarize themselves.

This study looked at students' estimations of the frequency of plagiarism at a large urban college and explored how that varied over the full range of types of plagiarism, from using another author's ideas to submitting an entire document copied verbatim from another author's work. It also looked at whether students believe some types of plagiarism are more serious than others. The consequences of students' beliefs that plagiarism is a common practice and how institutions should address that are discussed.

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A. Research Perspectives.

Plagiarism is a complex issue which has been studied using a variety of frameworks. Some research has focused on student characteristics that predict a greater likelihood of committing plagiarism, including levels of moral reasoning and self-esteem as well as achievement and motivation orientations (Angell, 2006; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). This perspective attributes the decision to plagiarize to characteristics of the students, discounting outside factors that might contribute to the choice to plagiarize.

Other research has regarded incidents of plagiarism as being the result of teaching style (Barnas, 2000) or classroom culture (Brown, 2012; Feldman, 2001) indicating the cause of plagiarism originates outside the student. From these perspectives, instructors are seen as contributing to students' beliefs that they can submit another author's work as their own by not providing an adequate level of rigor in their classrooms or by not checking student work for plagiarism.

Unintentional plagiarism has also been used as a framework for research (Belter & Du Pre, 2009; Blum, 2009; Colnerud & Rosander, 2009). This viewpoint often raises the question of whether students should be penalized when they are unaware they have plagiarized. While proof of intent to plagiarize is typically not believed to be necessary to support an accusation, whether students who are still learning to write academic papers should be expected to fully understand how to avoid plagiarism has been addressed in these studies.

Ethics, and in particular integrity, is another focus of the research on plagiarism (Conway & Groshek, 2009; Feldman, 2001; Kuther, 2003; McCabe et al., 2001; Hart & Morgan, 2010; Hudd, Apgar, Bronson, & Lee, 2009; Kwong, Ng, Mark, & Wong, 2010). That body of work examines plagiarism at the student, instructor, and institution levels, and emphasizes the need for institutions to convey the importance of honesty to students and for faculty to model ethical behavior for them.

More recently the focus of plagiarism research has been on technology-facilitated electronic access to text as a primary cause of the increase in the number of incidents of plagiarism (Jones, 2011; Trushell, Byrne, & Simpson, 2012; Wang, 2008). This method of plagiarism has become increasingly widespread through the effortless process of copying and pasting electronic text. Some studies have found that students may believe information on the internet does not belong to a particular author and, therefore, can legitimately be used by them in course assignments.

Engler et al. (2008), Hard et al. (2006), and the present study looked at plagiarism from the perspective of social/peer norms. According to social norms theory, individuals learn which behaviors are appropriate by observing the generally accepted behavior of others. For example, young adults have been found to overestimate the frequency of negative behaviors such as substance abuse by their peers, resulting in an inaccurate understanding of what is considered socially acceptable and an increase in those negative behaviors on their part (Berkowitz, 2004; Perkins, 2003; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Based on this theory, if students have the misperception that acts of plagiarism are common among their classmates, and that consequences, if any, are minor, they are more likely to commit plagiarism themselves.

B. What is Plagiarism?

Many studies of plagiarism do not provide an operational definition of it, seeming to assume there is a one common understanding that does not need explication. Powers (2009) points out that this can affect research findings because students' self-reports of plagiarism are affected by an individual understanding of the practices that could be considered plagiarism. Further, faculty and students often disagree about exactly what constitutes plagiarism (Kwong et al., 2010). Definitions of plagiarism from several of the studies that provided one are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of plagiarism.

Belter & DuPre (2009): <i>"One or more passages that was word-for-word the same as another source without appropriate citation and quotation marks."</i> p. 259
Colnerud & Rosander (2009): <i>"Using parts, or the whole, of a text written by another person without acknowledgement; submitting the same paper or parts of it, for credit in more than one course, falsification of information."</i> p. 506
Hard, Conway, & Moran (2006): <i>"Presenting, as one's own, the ideas or words of another person or persons for academic evaluation without proper acknowledgement."</i> p. 1059
Park (2003): <i>"Plagiarism involves literary theft, stealing (by copying) the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one's own without crediting the source."</i> p. 472
Wang (2008): <i>"Us[ing] somebody else's work (words and thoughts) without attribution."</i> p. 743
Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus (2010): <i>"Any nonzero percentage detected by Turn-It-In (after screening)."</i> p. 294

A common element across definitions is that plagiarism is the act of using another author's work without citation, thus portraying it as one's own work. Other common elements of definitions include descriptions of the length of the copied text, whether taking solely ideas from other authors is plagiarism, and the extent that the copied words were taken verbatim.

For the present study a definition of plagiarism was developed that addressed these elements: *Plagiarism is representing another author's ideas or words as your own in course documents or electronic postings. This would include submitting an entire document by another author as well as using a portion of text or ideas from another author's work and not citing the source. This would include information obtained from the internet, from other students, and from published and unpublished documents.* This definition was provided to the students on the survey they completed.

C. Plagiarism along a Continuum.

Incidents of plagiarism are viewed along a continuum, with some incidents regarded as more serious than others (Blum, 2009; Hudd et al., 2009; Jones, 2011; Kwong et al., 2010, Salmons, 2007). Studies of faculty and student understandings of plagiarism have found that faculty view most types of plagiarism as more serious than students view them (Kwong et al., 2010). Jones (2011) found that while all students recognized submitting an entire document written by another author as plagiarism, students saw copying a limited amount of text as less serious. Seventy-five percent of students saw purchasing a paper online as plagiarism, 67% thought copying text

verbatim without quotation marks was plagiarism, 50% saw paraphrasing text without citation as plagiarism, and 17% stated that students should not self-plagiarize by submitting the same work for assignments in different classes.

D. Student and Faculty Perceptions of Plagiarism Frequency.

Faculty and students tend to overestimate the frequency of student plagiarism (Engler et al., 2008; Hard et al., 2006; Wang, 2008). Students, in particular, see plagiarism as a common practice even though they report they have never plagiarized themselves (Wang, 2008). Students believe their friends are more likely to plagiarize than they are, but their friends are less likely to plagiarize than students they do not know (Engler et al., 2008; Kwong et al., 2010).

It is important to consider student overestimates of plagiarism by others because students' perceptions of peer behavior have a powerful effect on their own behavior (Hard et al., 2006; McCabe et al., 2001; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009). Both McCabe et al. (2001) and Rettinger and Kramer (2009) found that while there are a number of factors that predict cheating, knowing that other students have cheated has the greatest influence on a student's decision to cheat.

Even faculty, whose role it is to discover and address incidents of plagiarism, overestimate its occurrence, although to a lesser degree than students (Hard et al., 2006). An advantage to faculty overestimations of plagiarism is that it may make them more vigilant, benefitting students who do not plagiarize and who want it addressed (Kuther, 2003). Students generally appreciate instructors who can effectively monitor classroom learning and provide an appropriate level of rigor (Barnas, 2000). They want faculty to show respect for all students' efforts by not tolerating any form of cheating, including plagiarism – the most common form of cheating in higher education (Troost, 2009). Faculty can specifically mention in the course syllabus that submitting another author's work will not be tolerated, and the consequences if this happens, so students do not mistakenly believe that cheating will be ignored (Brown, 2012; Feldman, 2001). When incidents of plagiarism are uncovered, if faculty discuss the circumstances with the class, without disclosing the name of the student who plagiarized, they can show their vigilance when reviewing assignments and prevent additional incidents of plagiarism by students who thought it would be ignored (Feldman, 2001).

The research reported here is a part of a larger study that explored the scope and nature of plagiarism by students at a large urban college in order to determine the current extent of plagiarism there and how past institutional efforts to curb plagiarism were faring. These included implementation of an academic misconduct policy and use of plagiarism detection software.

The questions addressed in this report of the study are:

1. What is the frequency and nature of plagiarism admitted to by students?
2. What do students believe is the frequency and nature of plagiarism committed by other students?
3. Do students view some types of plagiarism as more serious than others?
4. Do students believe that the types of plagiarism they view as more serious are more likely to be committed by other students?

II. Method.

A. Participants.

A survey was conducted at a large urban public comprehensive college with over ten thousand students, undergraduate and graduate, enrolled each year. An email was sent to all students, inviting them to complete the anonymous electronic survey and providing them with an internet link to it. The number of emails sent varied by department, but all students received at least one email. Information about the survey was also posted on the home page of the campus library website and on the webpage students use to access email, check grades, register for courses, and so forth. The data collection process was reviewed and approved by the college's institutional review board.

Of the 626 students who responded to the survey, 334 students reported that they had been enrolled in classes which had assignments that could have been plagiarized and completed the survey items analyzed in the present study. Assignments which could be plagiarized were described in the survey as writing assignments that included information that could have been obtained from another source and misrepresented as the student's own work. The 334 students included 194 undergraduates and 131 graduate students. Nine students did not report their student level. Respondents ages ranged from 18 years to 62 years, and almost 52% of the students had a self-reported grade point average over 3.5, on a scale of 0.0 to 4.0. Table 2 provides full demographic information about the sample.

B. Instrument.

The student survey asked respondents about their views and experiences regarding plagiarism and was developed by reviewing published studies on plagiarism, examining efforts to address plagiarism at institutions across the country, and discussing current concerns with administrators and faculty at the institution where the study was conducted. This report of the research will focus on three questions from the survey.

In the first of these questions, the students were asked to rate four types of plagiarism as *not at all serious*, *somewhat serious*, or *very serious*. The four types of plagiarism they rated were:

- Using ideas from another author's work and not citing the source
- Using phrases from another author's work and not citing the source
- Using sentences/paragraphs from another author's work and not citing the source
- Submitting an entire document by another author as your own work

In the second question, students were asked to indicate how often they thought students committed each of the four types of plagiarism in writing assignments. The response choices were *Never*, *Once*, *Rarely (Few of them)*, *Occasionally (Up to one-half of them)*, *Regularly (More than half of them)*, *Always (All of them)*.

The third question was the same as the second question, but asked each student to indicate how often they had committed each of the four types of plagiarism. The response choices were the same as those in the second question.

Table 2. Student Demographics.

Student Characteristic	Percent (n)
Gender	
Male	32.6 (109)
Female	66.8 (223)
Gender not provided	0.6 (2)
Level	
Freshman	6.6 (22)
Sophomore	5.1 (17)
Junior	16.5 (55)
Senior	29.9 (100)
Graduate	39.2 (131)
Level not provided	2.7 (9)
Grade Point Average	
< 2.00	0.9 (3)
2.00 to 2.50	3.9 (13)
2.51 to 3.00	9.3 (31)
3.01 to 3.50	20.0 (67)
3.51 to 4.00	51.5 (172)
Grade point average not provided	14.4 (48)
Age	
< 20	75. (25)
20 to 25	51.2 (171)
26 to 30	13.1 (44)
> 30	18.9 (63)
Age not provided	9.3 (31)

C. Analysis.

Data analysis was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, descriptive statistics of the categorical and Likert-type scale survey responses were used to answer the first two research questions. In the second stage, the third and fourth research questions were answered using inferential z tests to determine if there were statistically significant differences in proportions of the sample who selected survey item responses. In each analysis the requirement of at least five cases for each of the two responses compared, to approximate a normal distribution, was met. A type-1 error rate of $\alpha = .05$ was used for all tests of significance. Odds ratios (OR) were used to determine the strength-of-effect for all significant results, with OR 1.50, 3.00, and 5.00 used to indicate small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Chen, Cohen, & Chen, 2010). For ease of interpretation, all odds ratios were calculated so that a value greater than 1.00 would result (McHugh, 2009).

III. Results.

Table 3 shows the results for question 1: What is the frequency and nature of plagiarism admitted to by students? A majority of the respondents said they had *never* used another author’s phrases (62.6%), sentences/paragraphs (82.3%), or entire piece of writing (96.4%). A majority of the students also reported that had either *never* or *once* used another author’s idea and portrayed it as their own work (40.7% and 10.5%, respectively). As evident from the values in the table, there was a systematic decline in the admissions of plagiarism as the amount of text that was copied and the rate of occurrence increased. None of the students reported *always* committing plagiarism of any type and few to none reported plagiarizing *regularly* (0.0% to 3.9%).

Table 3. Survey question about how often respondent plagiarizes.

Question: How often have you done the following, without citing the source?	Never Percent(n) ^a	Once Percent(n)	Rarely Percent(n)	Occasionally Percent(n)	Regularly Percent(n)	Always Percent(n)
Used another author’s ideas	40.7 (136)	10.5 (35)	32.6 (109)	12.3 (41)	3.9 (13)	0.0 (0)
Used another author’s phrases	62.6 (209)	10.8 (36)	18.6 (62)	6.6 (22)	1.5 (5)	0.0 (0)
Used another author’s sentences/paragraphs	82.3 (275)	6.6 (22)	7.2 (24)	3.0 (10)	0.9 (3)	0.0 (0)
Used entire document by another author	96.4 (322)	0.0 (0)	2.7 (9)	0.9 (3)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)

^a Students significantly more likely to *never* commit each type of plagiarism than other students, $p < .05$. See Table 4.

Table 4 provides information about question 2: What do students believe is the frequency and nature of plagiarism committed by other students? The majority of respondents believe that other students are either *occasionally* or *regularly* plagiarizing ideas and phrases (39.8% and 40.1%, 48.5% and 22.8%, respectively), and that other students are *rarely* or *occasionally* plagiarizing sentences/paragraphs or entire documents by other authors (40.7% and 34.7%, 49.1% and 9.6%, respectively). A small proportion of respondents reported they believe other students *always* commit each of the four types of plagiarism (1.2% to 3.6%). Overall, respondent’s reports of their beliefs about other students’ plagiarism do not show the systematic decline seen in the students’ reports of their own plagiarism as the amount of work that was copied and the frequency increased. In fact, almost half of the respondents (49.1%) reported that

they believe other students have submitted an entire document by another author a few times (*rarely*).

Table 4. Survey question about how often other students plagiarize.

Question: How often do you think most students do the following, without citing the source?	Never Percent(n) ^a	Once Percent(n)	Rarely Percent(n)	Occasionally Percent(n)	Regularly Percent(n)	Always Percent(n)
Used another author's ideas	1.5 (5)	1.5 (5)	13.5 (45)	39.3 (133)	40.1 (134)	3.6 (12)
Used another author's phrases	2.7 (9)	2.4 (8)	22.2 (74)	48.5 (162)	22.8 (76)	1.5 (5)
Used another author's sentences/paragraphs	5.7 (19)	7.8 (26)	40.7 (136)	34.7 (116)	9.9 (33)	1.2 (4)
Used entire document by another author	19.2 (64)	18.0 (60)	49.1 (164)	9.6 (32)	3.0 (10)	1.2 (4)

^a Students significantly more likely to *never* commit each type of plagiarism than other students, $p < .05$. See Table 3.

Information in Table 5 answers question 3: Do students view some types of plagiarism as more serious than others? The pattern of responses shows that students found plagiarism more serious as the amount of material taken from another author increased. Most of the students believed using another author's ideas is at least *somewhat serious*. A majority of the students indicated that using another author's phrases or sentences/paragraphs is *very serious* plagiarism (51.8%, 78.1%, respectively). Almost all of the students reported that copying an entire document written by another author was *very serious* (96.4%). To answer the research question, the proportions of students who chose each response – *not at all*, *somewhat*, *very* – for plagiarizing another author's ideas and for plagiarizing an entire document by another author were compared. There was a statistically significant difference at each of the three levels of seriousness. There was a significant difference between the proportion who indicated that using another author's ideas was not at all serious and the proportion who indicated copying an entire document by another author was not at all serious, $z = 7.736$, $p < .05$, with a very large odds ratio of 16.51. The odds of a student believing that using another author's idea is *not at all* serious is more than 16 times greater than the odds of a student believing that copying an entire document by another author is *not at all* serious. The proportion who responded that using another author's idea was *somewhat* serious was significantly different from the proportion that indicated copying an entire document by another author was *somewhat* serious, $z = 14.352$, $p < .05$, with a very large odds ratio of 49.01. The odds of a student reporting that using another author's idea is

somewhat serious is about 49 times greater than a student reporting copying an entire document by another author is *somewhat* serious. Finally, the difference in the proportion of students who said using another author's idea is *very serious* was significantly different from the proportion of students who said using an entire document by another author is *very serious*, $z = -18.069$ $p < .05$, with a very large odds ratio of 66.52. The odds of a student believing that copying an entire document is *very serious* is over 66 times greater than the odds of a student believing that using another author's idea is *very serious*. These findings indicate that students do believe that some types of plagiarism are more serious than others and that the level of seriousness of the plagiarism is based on the amount of information taken from another author. However, it should be noted the students reported they believed each type of plagiarism was serious in nature.

Table 5. Survey question about seriousness of types of plagiarism.

Question: How serious an incident is each of the following?	Not at all Percent(n)	Somewhat Percent(n)	Very Percent(n)
Using another author's ideas ^a	20.1 (67)	51.2 (171)	28.7 (96)
Using another author's phrases	4.5 (15)	43.7 (146)	51.8 (173)
Using another author's sentences/paragraphs	2.1 (7)	19.8 (66)	78.1 (261)
Using entire document by another author	1.5 (5)	2.1 (7)	96.4 (322)

^aUsing ideas significantly different from using entire document, at each level of seriousness, $p < .05$.

Question 4, whether students believe that the types of plagiarism they view as serious are more likely to be committed by other students than by them, was answered by comparing the proportion of students who indicated they had *never* committed each type of plagiarism and the proportion who indicated they believed other students had *never* committed that type of plagiarism. A statistically significant difference was found for each type of plagiarism, $p < .05$. Students' were more likely to report that they *never* plagiarized ideas, phrases, sentences/paragraphs, or an entire document than they were to report they believed that other students had *never* committed each of those four types of plagiarism, $z = 12.421, 16.503, 19.953, 20.211$, respectively. The odds ratios show that the difference in proportions increased as the amount of information plagiarized – the seriousness of the plagiarism – increased. The odds of a student reporting they would *never* plagiarize ideas, phrases, sentences/paragraphs, or an entire document compared to the odds they believed another student would *never* commit the same act were all very large – 45.20, 60.38, 77.27, and 113.20, respectively.

IV. Discussion.

This study surveyed students at a large urban college to explore their beliefs about plagiarism. Students were asked how often they commit plagiarism and how often they think other students commit plagiarism. They were also asked about how serious an incident they considered each of four types of plagiarism – using another author’s ideas, phrases, sentences/paragraphs, and submitting an entire document written by another author. Most of the students in the sample reported never committing plagiarism of any type and there was a systematic decline in the admissions of plagiarism as the amount of text that was copied and the frequency of occurrence increased. The participants indicated they believe that some types of plagiarism are more serious than others, with taking larger sections of text from another author seen as the more serious incidents of plagiarism. Still, even using another author’s ideas was believed to be at least somewhat serious by most students.

The pattern of students being less likely to commit the types of plagiarism they saw as more serious was not evident in their reports of the plagiarism they believe was committed by other students. Consistent with the findings from other research (Engler et al., 2008), the participants reported that other students were markedly more likely than them to commit each type of plagiarism. In fact, a small proportion of participants reported they believe some students always commit each of the four types of plagiarism.

The implications of these findings must be considered in relation to social norms theory (Berkowitz, 2004; Perkins, 2003; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986) and the research by McCabe et al. (2001) and Rettinger and Kramer (2009) which found that when students believe others have cheated, they are more likely to choose to cheat. Students who overestimate the frequency of plagiarism by classmates may view plagiarizing as a norm and choose to plagiarize to complete an assignment. In particular, they may be more likely to think it is okay to use another author’s ideas or text phrases – types of plagiarism, which they view as less serious. Therefore, it is critical that students have accurate information about the frequency and types of plagiarism committed by students in their classes and at their school. Institutions and course instructors must find ways to give students accurate information about the types of plagiarism that occur and number of incidents that are discovered. A campus-wide reporting system should be used to gather and distribute the information, and faculty can tell students the number and type of actual incidents they encounter semester to semester. Supplied with this information, students will be less likely to overestimate the number of incidents of plagiarism at their school and may, therefore, be less likely to plagiarize themselves.

Informing students that instructors look for plagiarism in assignments and that there are consequences if it is discovered can help to deter students from plagiarizing and create an environment where it is clear that ethical behavior is valued. Reducing plagiarism provides benefits beyond an ethical education environment; it can also improve student learning. When students do their own work, instead of copying it from another author, they learn research and writing skills, and they learn the topic content of the papers they write. The long-term benefits of an academic environment where integrity and learning are cultivated cannot be overestimated.

One limitation of this study is the possibility that the participants who chose to respond to the survey may have been those who actually were less likely to plagiarize than their classmates and therefore their claim that others are more likely to plagiarize was accurate. More than half of the respondents had a grade point average over 3.5, and studies have found that students with lower grade point averages are more likely to plagiarize (Belter & DuPre, 2009; Park, 2003).

Another limitation of this study is the reliance on student self-reports about their behavior. It is possible that some respondents were purposely untruthful or that they inaccurately reported they had not plagiarized. They may have viewed any plagiarism by them as justifiable behavior. Survey responses may also have been inaccurate if students did not fully understand the meaning of the questions asked.

It should be noted that the finding that students believe taking any amount of text is more serious than taking another author's idea may be due to the order that the types of plagiarism were listed in the survey -- with taking ideas listed first, followed by taking increasing amounts of text. While it is clear that an increased amount of copied text -- from phrases/sentences to paragraphs to an entire document -- indicates a more serious incident of plagiarism, it is not as clear whether copying another author's ideas is less or more serious than copying text. Course instructors, especially those who are published authors in their field, may believe that plagiarism of an original idea is more egregious. Students, who typically have no experience in professional writing, may not understand the value of developing a unique idea in a field of study and, therefore, see taking another author's idea as less important than copying text.

Even if instructors believe plagiarism of ideas is the most serious type of plagiarism by published scholars, they may believe the reverse when assessing student work -- viewing copying of ideas as typical behavior in the process of developing writing skills. They may even believe that copying small amounts of text, such as phrases, are not serious incidents. While all incidents of plagiarism by students must be addressed, instructors should determine the appropriate consequences for each based on a student's writing skills and knowledge at the time the assignment is completed, the instructor's belief about whether the incident was intentional, and institution policies.

In conclusion, while the findings from this study cannot be generalized because they are based on a relatively small number of students' self-reports at one institution, the findings do provide information about a novel practice that may reduce the number of incidents of plagiarism. Publicizing the nature and frequency of plagiarism on a campus is a relatively cost-free and potentially effective way to not only reduce the time-consuming and emotionally difficult process of dealing with incidents of plagiarism, but to improve student learning as well. Additional studies should be conducted at schools to explore their students' understandings of plagiarism and to determine whether sharing accurate information about incidents of plagiarism will reduce the likelihood of incidents overall.

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