

# Buying A's and Counting FTEs

Plagiarism, Consumerism,  
and the Economics of Higher Education<sup>1</sup>

*Michael Murphy*

THERE IS—I remain convinced in my heart of hearts—a wonderfully provocative sentence somewhere in composition theorist Ann Berthoff's general oeuvre I'd like to begin here by quoting—though, since I haven't been able to locate it in my well-worn copy of the *The Making of Meaning* (1981), and all my Google searches turn up nothing, I have to acknowledge that it's possible this sentence might be part projection, the product of my sense that it's just the kind of thing the lovably cranky old Berthoff *would* say, even if she never actually has. Very roughly, then, that sentence—delivered, as my memory reconstructs it, in a talk to a room full of writing-across-the-curriculum teachers—goes something like this: “Any teacher who receives a bought paper deserves it.” Always the provocateur, what Berthoff meant—and I'm sure she'd say this whether I've gotten the particulars of her sentence right or not—was that having authentic, intellectually intimate relationships with students requires a level of engagement with the work of individual students that effectively makes plagiarism impossible: get to know your students as thinkers and writers, give them assignments narrowly tied to the idiosyncratic contours of genuine class conversations, talk with them about their ideas as they develop, read their evolving drafts. *Teach* them. Then simple cheating largely disappears.

Noted plagiarism-and-authorship scholar Rebecca Moore Howard strikes similar notes in her work—particularly her shot across the bow of the profession published several years ago in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called “Forget about Policing Plagiarism: Just *Teach*.” Echoing Berthoff in noting that “We beg our students to cheat if we assign a major paper and then have no further involvement with the project until the students turn in their work” (Howard,

2001), Howard broadens Berthoff's critique (or the one I've attributed to Berthoff) to address the larger pedagogical enterprise:

even as we're catching and punishing plagiarists in our classes, we have to ask ourselves why they are plagiarizing. Some of the possible answers to that question are not appealing.... It is possible that students are cheating because they don't value the opportunity of learning in our classes.... It is possible that our pedagogy has not adjusted to contemporary circumstances as readily as have our students. Rather than assigning tasks that have meaning, we may be assuming that students will find meaning in performing assigned tasks. (36)

Dishonesty often has something to do with disengagement, Howard suggests—and disengagement, she goes on, can have *lots* to do with bad teaching and irrelevant courses.

While I don't by any means dispute Berthoff's or Howard's sense that certain pedagogical practices help cultivate—or at least enable—student dishonesty, I'd suggest widening responsibility even a little further. Teachers

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work in specific moments under specific circumstances—mainly institutional ones—and to place the blame at their feet alone (which I don't believe either Howard or Berthoff means to do, actually) would be to fall prey to precisely the same sort of myopia we're so often encouraged to avoid by participants in discussions of plagiarism and intellectual property: that is, if texts don't begin and end with single, originary

authors in sociohistorical vacuums, neither do courses with teachers. In fact, I'm tempted to revise the formulation I've attributed to Berthoff: "Any *university* that needs to create a task force on bought papers deserves them."

Of course, like Berthoff, I'm overstating for effect a bit here—but I stand by the point behind the hyperbole. To my mind, plagiarists are in large part—more than it's comfortable for many of us to acknowledge—the incorporated academy's chickens come home to roost.

It's often observed that the much-reported "rash" of plagiarism in the age of the Internet results from a specific sort of ethical problem: crass, bourgeois, Generation-AOL students' ever-increasingly "consumerist" sensibility about education. This is what Gary Pavela has described with passion and conviction

as “instrumental” approaches to education. Education is something you buy, and you get what you pay for. The more expensive the paper mill, the better the product; the more prestigious the school, the better the job after graduation. The comment reportedly made by a parent calling to complain about a son or daughter’s mediocre grade at the relatively expensive private university where I taught as a graduate student became notorious among colleagues as a representation of this sensibility: “But I’m not paying for C’s.” Obviously, it’s a short slide from this idea of schooling to a bought paper, so from this perspective the problem of cheating becomes, as the title of Vibiana Bowman’s (2004) opening chapter in *The Plagiarism Plague* wistfully puts it, “Teaching Intellectual Honesty in a Tragically Hip World.” Student ethics seem to have disappeared somewhere in the space between the mall and the desktop.

Even someone trying as hard to understand the motivations of knowing student-plagiarists as compositionist Kelly Ritter—who feels constrained to acknowledge with sympathy “the complexity of the students’ academic needs, which sometimes are in conflict with their own personal ethics and morals” (2005, 606)—imagines that the phenomenon of online paper-buying all comes back in the end to “the relationship already in place between *student* authors and consumer culture that dictates the role writing plays in one’s college career” (603). While Ritter worries that we need to understand better the motivations of knowing plagiarists, whom she contends steal academic writing less because they’re unethical than because they’ve been taught to “not believe that they can or should be authors of their own academic work” (602), she also sees students as sadly easy targets for the “consumer-driven discourse of online paper mills” (602). Our students, she laments, “frequently see college writing ... as an economic rather than an intellectual act” (603). It’s for this reason, because of this commonplace association between lapsed student morality and consumer culture, that the often-repeated term recommended by Becky Howard to denounce simple dishonesty, as opposed to other inadvertent forms of plagiarism like what she calls “patchwriting,” is so laden with marketplace ethics—not “cheating,” she says, but “fraud.” And it’s for this reason, too, that Howard is so generally uncompromising, as Ritter points out, about the severity of the penalties she sees as appropriate for “fraudulent” work.

And yet, truth be told, it’s difficult for me not to wonder about the degree to which higher education at the turn of the millennium, which purports to stand in horror and dismay at the proliferation of consumerist approaches to schooling, actually reinforces and perhaps even cultivates them. I find it difficult not to wonder, that is, about the degree to which we ourselves have encouraged students to see not only writing papers but going to college itself precisely as “an economic rather than an intellectual act.”

I mean this not only in the sense that the general culture of higher education has, for some time now, increasingly focused on vocation and the economic promise of a college degree in its recruitment of potential students—consider most any of the TV spots for individual campuses that run endlessly during the Division I men's basketball tournament, for example—but in the sense that our managerial priorities both mark us clearly for students as a corporation and make us tangibly complicit in the circumstances surrounding the plagiarism problem. To my mind, the economic landscape of contemporary higher education, which features large lecture classes, heavy teaching loads, increasing administrative expectations, and underpaid part-time faculty teaching off the tenure track, typically makes authentic intellectual work with students—the kind of ongoing conversation between teachers and students that Berthoff and Howard have in mind (a version of the Plato-Aristotle relationship as Gary Pavela describes it)—effectively impossible. In our rush to generate FTEs<sup>2</sup>—the increasingly universal measure of faculty and department output calculated on the basis of total student credit hours (a language revealingly no longer reserved for academic administrators!)—we lose much of what matters most in education. I'd be lying if I said that in my own 75-seat sections of the grammar course that my institution requires of its elementary education majors I *ever* manage to work as anything like a mentor with most students, as they assemble the journals of observed nonstandard usages I assign or as they write reflections on required tutoring experiences. Even by the most conservative estimates, less than 15% of the courses taught nationally in composition and rhetoric are led by faculty on tenure lines (Coalition on the Academic Work Force, 2006)—meaning that a fair share of the 85% balance works part-time on two or more campuses. This also means that the burden of committee work, student advisement, and assessment placed in turn on the reduced core of tenure-line faculty gets ever heavier. These realities are well enough documented that I probably don't need to rehearse them further, especially to people who necessarily live with them every day. But we should keep in mind that our students live with their effects in the classroom as well—too often, big classrooms with lots of students and busy, distracted instructors—which not only makes preventative approaches to plagiarism very difficult but communicates much to students about the apparently universal urgency of bottom lines. Is it any wonder, then, if they see higher education in terms we recognize as mercenary (or “instrumental,” as Professor Pavela suggests)?

To some extent, even knowledge itself is susceptible to this sort of pressure. Many have pointed out that much of the cut-and-paste dynamic is a function of a commodified notion of knowledge as content that, of course, lends itself to easy assessment (so that paper-reading becomes simply asking the question *have students reproduced the information contained in readings and lectures?*): in this model,

knowledge is something to be not created by writers but gathered and collated. It's writing-as-foraging. And if knowledge is property, as students often reason, on the basis of this model, and if one has made the effort to find and assemble a coherent set of relevant passages, well then ... since possession is nine-tenths of the law, it must belong to the assembler. And of course, we can feel safe chuckling a little snidely at this sensibility—those bourgeois students again—but I've had student writers who practiced cut-and-paste plagiarism (and by that I mean assembling whole papers of nothing but gathered passages) tell me not only that they don't understand it as wrong, but that they in fact *perceived it to be the writing practice prescribed by the professors in their disciplines*.

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A magazine journalist writing about plagiarism under the pseudonym Dougie Child—herself a former writer for an online paper mill—elaborates another interesting connection between this epistemology and economics in the recent *Product Versus Process: The Term Paper Industry and the New Face of Cheating in American Education*. Child (2005) contends that an increasing preoccupation with grades and products alone in the No-Child-Left-Behind Age—not with what really happens to students intellectually, but with how many answers they get right—is responsible for encouraging students to see education in general as a matter of exchange and quantitative certification. According to Child, “The central issue” with respect to “why the term paper industry exists” is

the priority that education places on student product. Product in this respect is the outcome of student effort: student product takes the form of grades, standardized testing, and any manner of the numerous school-related outcomes that can be interpreted as representing student academic ability. The term paper industry profits from our nation's embrace of an education system in which the product of students' efforts is perceived as more important than the process the student uses to create the product. (5)

She resolves, “Seizing [on] product-based learning as the only permissible form of education changes our views on what is acceptable in education: cheating is still wrong in principle, but it gets results” (11).

My own experiences in the classroom, for what they're worth, suggest that our students too sense an inconsistency between how we *really* function as an institution and our moral stance on plagiarism. I taught a course at SUNY Oswego called "Plagiarism, Citation, and Textual Ownership" in which we not only practice citation but also talk about it, and though I've long recognized that many students resent academic citation practices, which they see as vague, arbitrary, and even a little exclusionary (what composition teacher doesn't recognize this?), I was shocked by the stridency—and the eloquence, too—of the responses I got when I asked students early in the semester to browse some academic integrity websites. They identified what they read immediately as "a sales pitch" and even "academic evangelism." One student called an anti-plagiarism organization "a group of mercenaries brought in to fix the problems that professors don't want to," and its work seemed to strike them all as excessively punitive. Many found the language offensively "trite and cheesy," and one complained, "it reads like a civics lesson from the 1950s." You don't need to agree with these diagnoses to recognize that they have a certain real power and authenticity. Seldom have I found students more inherently invested in any topic than they seemed to be in this one, and my instincts tell me that we very much need to listen to them if we hope to have any effect on how they see this issue.

Having begun with an intentional overstatement, let me conclude more carefully, with some qualifications. I don't mean that nothing good can ever happen in lecture halls, that wise teachers can't craft plagiarism-resistant assignments for groups of 75 or 100, or—certainly—that two-campus, "freeway-flying" part-timers (who actually do so much of the teaching in our field) don't do remarkable, heroic, fascinating work with their students. (Indeed, my chair describes a system of rotating assignments, public research reports, and periodic small group meetings in his 100-seat cinema theory course that strikes me as genuinely brilliant planning—just the kind of thing really devoted and expert teachers do with difficult circumstances. And, as I've insisted in print before, much of the most innovative, sophisticated, effective teaching I've seen in composition has been done by colleagues working off the tenure track.) But I do mean that we rely far too heavily on these sorts of arrangements, that sooner or later they catch up with us, that as a rule other practices are far healthier pedagogically, that these practices send very clear signals to our students about our real values, and that until they begin to change—since under the present circumstances we have precious little hope of approximating the laudable pedagogical model of Socratic partnership I heard Gary Pavela describe—all our calls for "codes of honor" to heighten the "academic integrity" of the least powerful and well-represented among us—our students—run the risk of seeming to them a kind of empty moralizing.

## Notes

1. This essay is adapted from a presentation given at the SUNY Faculty Senate Symposium on Academic Integrity in Albany, NY, in March 2006.

2. FTE="Full Time Enrollment." At many universities, Syracuse University among them, budgets are determined in part or whole by tuition, departments vie for funding competitively with other departments, and individual instructors vie competitively with other instructors within their own departments to keep teaching the courses they want; FTEs are the number of bodies in chairs, or the number of student tuitions the department our course is good for, and thus the unit of measurement by which funding and course offerings are allocated or denied. A course will be offered next term not if it's *taught well* this term but if its lecture hall is filled with tuition-paying (at full-time rates) bodies.

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