

Letter to My Teaching Assistant

Academic Integrity from the Student Athlete's Perspective

Lucy McGregor

DEAR TA,

The purpose of this letter is to give you—teaching assistants and faculty—an insight into a student's life and to help shed light on the student's perspective on academic life, in particular athletes' academic integrity. Athletes are one group of students that face a hard time managing their time due to their academic and sporting commitments. I want to share with you the factors that may play a role in students' and student-athletes' choice to plagiarize. As you could probably guess, the biggest of these is time constraints. But plagiarizing is also tempting and easy to do when assignments are easy and do not require much outside thinking. I thought that by sharing some of my perspectives, we could problem-solve on how to help each other out so that I'm less tempted to cheat and you can see how much I care about my learning.

On a personal note, I am a junior transfer student here in Syracuse for an academic year from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. I am majoring in psychology, and hope to go on to do postgraduate study in clinical psychology eventually. I have actually gained quite a different perspective from studying in America. It is quite different from what it is like back in New Zealand. Being a student athlete is one thing that I have found hard to adjust to. I have found it difficult mainly because of the intense nature of Division I sports. It almost feels as though we are professional athletes because of the huge time commitment that is required, the pressures to perform well, all the scholarship money that goes into sports, and the way that it seems to take over one's life. Coming from New Zealand, where we do not have anything like the NCAA competition, this was a big culture shock for me, and one that took adjusting to. I have played sports very competitively at home in the past,

but it is different here because of the very nature of the NCAA: the fact that it is a university-based competition means that you have to be a student and an athlete at the same time. One does not exist without the other. At home, the people I play sports with come from different backgrounds, and when we play we represent only our sports team, not like here, where you are not only a representative of the field hockey team, you are a representative of Syracuse University, too.

The academic side of things is different also. In New Zealand, the learning is more autonomous. I was quite shocked to come here and have attendance taken in lectures, and points deducted if you missed a certain number. In one class, the teacher offered bonus points for attending, which seems even sillier than requiring attendance. In New Zealand, you could skip all your lectures and no one would notice, or care for that matter! The emphasis is placed really on the content. If you miss class, you miss content and that has its effect. A bigger emphasis is also placed on midterm exams than at home too, where it's all about the final exam. I don't know why the difference, really, or if more or less people cheat in these different systems. What I do know from my experience at home is that there I am responsible for my own learning, and my grade there reflects what I know, whereas here you are not only getting a grade for what you know, but for how diligent you are with your learning as well.

It seems obvious that students plagiarize because of time constraints. I am sure that almost everyone in their university career has had that horrible, hopeless feeling before a test, knowing that they haven't reviewed all the material that they should have. Perhaps there is one certain thing that you can't quite remember—a formula, a theorist's name, how many calories are in one gram of protein—so why not just write it on your arm, or stick an inconspicuous piece of paper on the brim of your cap; surely no one would notice, would they? Because athletes have extra commitments and need to have good grades to play, it might be assumed that athletes might want to cheat more. Athletes' training schedules are full-on, to say the least. NCAA rules stipulate that all Division I teams shall train for no more than four hours per day during the season, with one mandatory day off per week (football and basketball may have exceptions to this rule). Thus, an athlete is permitted to train for 20 hours per week. This does not include traveling time, and time spent competing, time spent in the training room stretching and getting treatment before and after trainings and games. Thus, the 20 hours per week probably works out to be many, many more hours when one includes all the other mandatory engagements an athlete must commit to. In the off-season, athletes are still required to train a lot as well. The field hockey team, for example, is scheduled to train every weekday for four-hour sessions, with perhaps another one-hour session on Sunday evenings. This is not a light commitment, considering that student-athletes have to organize their

studying schedules around their training times, often putting their sporting commitments before academics. Hence plagiarism and cheating become more of an option when there is not enough time to spend on academics.

Furthermore, in order to be in keeping with NCAA rules, athletes must pass a certain number of classes so they will be considered full-time students. Thus, there is extra pressure to succeed in subjects, because if one doesn't pass enough and fails too many classes to be considered a full-time student, he or she will no longer be eligible to play. Particular sports also have specific stipulations as to what is required by their athletes. For field hockey, one has to have a GPA of 2.8 or above to stay out of "tables." Tables requires that student athletes go to the academic center (located at the Manley Field House) and study there for ten hours every week (there is a computer system there that tallies athletes' hours spent in tables, and reports go out to coaches every week to ensure athletes are going). Going to tables isn't exactly a favorite pastime of athletes; to say the least, it is a chore to have to spend a further 10 hours a week studying at tables. When athletes spend upwards of 20 hours a week training, plus time spent in class, plus ten hours a week in tables, it does not leave much, if any, free time. Furthermore, there is quite a social aspect to tables, because there are lots of athletes in there, from not only your team, but also other sports, and so a lot of people actually do not get very much work done! This not only defeats the purpose of making tables mandatory, but it leaves the athletes with more homework to do and less time to do it in. Thus they are pressured to keep their GPAs high enough in order to stay out of tables—another added factor that could lead to cheating and plagiarism.

Another factor, perhaps not so obvious, that may contribute to plagiarizing in particular is the nature of assignments themselves. I know that there are some courses that have used the same assignments for years, and so for people to do well in these assignments, they need only obtain copies of people's past work and copy these! Personally, I have been most tempted to plagiarize when I have been assigned very easy projects, ones that don't really require any free thinking on my part.

I will elaborate. For one essay we were asked to write briefly (1,500 words) on the historical background to a particular ethnic conflict. While this was indeed a valid and interesting topic, the nature of the assignment was such that

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it was too easy to simply access a very basic history book, or *Wikipedia*, or something similar, and virtually copy and paste what these sources were saying. Rather than simply asking us to regurgitate facts, why not ask us to relate this ethnic conflict to another similar conflict and compare and contrast these? Assignments that require no personal interpretation, opinion, or free thinking, leave themselves wide open to plagiarism.

I can imagine that being a TA would not be an easy job, and part of the difficulty would be to try to tailor your classes so they suit a group of students with very different backgrounds, learning styles, and lifestyles. Personally, I think

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that if a TA succeeded in making the learning environment fun and stimulating, and gave assignments and tests on topics that people were interested in, the urge for people to plagiarize and cheat would lessen. As mentioned, the pressure on students, and in particular student athletes, to succeed academically is great, and therefore the practice of plagiarism and cheating may emerge because of this. If a TA is willing to help people who are having difficulty academically,

and actively encourages students to make the most of services such as office hours and extra study sessions, then the students will probably feel less pressured, and hopefully seek help if they are feeling overwhelmed. All people, including TAs, face huge time constraints, so I don't think that exceptions should be made for student athletes. I do believe, however, that it does help student athletes to know that a TA is willing to help out. Personally, I would not feel the inclination to plagiarize and cheat if I knew that I had a TA whom I could talk to about academics, who would understand my situation being a student athlete, and who would therefore help me with any potential problems I might face with academics and sport.

Sincerely,
Lucy McGregor