

# Designing a Writing Tutor-Led Plagiarism Intervention Program

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## **Abstract**

This article examines how one public university helped address student plagiarism through a collaboration between the Math and Writing Center and the Office of Student Conduct and Integrity. Included is a thorough discussion of how the program was designed, the roles each office played, and how the two areas collaborated to assess success. Since the implementation of this program in 2015, writing tutors have worked for three hours each with over 400 students and plagiarism offenses have decreased to less than one percent for the 2017-18 academic year. Ideas for replicating this initiative are provided.

## **Introduction**

We hear it in department meetings, at gatherings of teaching assistants, in faculty professional development events – I hear it every week while keeping my hours as a writing fellow in our Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence. It is stated with frustration, with anger, with exasperation, with a look of total surprise and, ultimately, with disappointment. “Our students plagiarize.” Faculty tend to see it as a problem unique to our campus or, sometimes, as a problem unique to their classrooms. There is often a sense of relief when others mention it – some new faculty think it only happens to them, and it must be their fault. Of course, student plagiarism is not a problem exclusive to Indiana State University (ISU), a 4-year public institution in Indiana.

At universities all across the world, students are plagiarizing

on a million different assignments in a million different ways. Some copy and paste from the internet; some buy papers wholesale from professional writers; some have friends write for them and others recycle papers they have used for other classes – no matter how it is done, plagiarism presents a real challenge to both faculty and administrators (Cronan, Mullins & Douglas, 2018; Harji, Ismail, Chetty & Letchumann, 2017; MacLennan, 2018; Singh & Remenyi, 2016; Sprajc et al., 2017). In addition, students are plagiarizing for myriad reasons, including lack of confidence, poor time management, lack of education about how to cite properly, and conflicting cultural ideas of what is fair to use in a paper (Adhikari, 2018; Chien, 2017; Selemani, Chawinga & Dube, 2018). Research shows that the problem of plagiarism is increasing at institutions around the world, leading faculty and administrators to search for answers regarding how to handle this problem (Ellery, 2008; Evering & Moorman, 2012; Singh & Remenyi; 2018). This increase is especially present in Business schools and is attributed by some scholars to the ease of access to other people's work the internet provides (Thomas, 2017). The most popular way for universities to deal with the heightened threat of plagiarism at the moment is through the use of plagiarism detection software like Turnitin. Numerous free and for-purchase versions of such software exist, and resources are constantly being allocated to conduct new studies on the best software-based methods for catching plagiarism (Park, Jung, Lee & Joe, 2018). For many of these software programs, students have to run their papers through the software system when turning it in. The software then identifies any overlap between the student paper and other papers found on the internet or submitted through the software before. This means that not only can a student not as easily copy and paste information found online, they also cannot submit the same paper for multiple classes, and students cannot share papers. The software program often gives a percentage that indicates how much of the paper's content was found elsewhere.

While the use of plagiarism detection software is shown to reduce instances of students copy and pasting or using wholesale articles from the internet, software programs do not teach students why plagiarism is wrong and how to avoid doing it accidentally

(Shang, 2018; Weber-Wulff, 2016). Students who do not understand why a paper is showing a high percentage of plagiarism may still need the guidance of a faculty member or tutor to help them understand the result and correct the problem.

In the fall of 2015, the problem of plagiarism directly affected the Math and Writing Center (MWC) when a writing tutor who had been working with students for a year was accused of plagiarism after boasting about cheating on social media. Ironically, this tutor was scheduled to give a plagiarism presentation for a faculty member who had approached the Math and Writing Center because she had caught several students plagiarizing. The coordinator and I (at the time the MWC's Director) had a choice – fire the tutor or use this unfortunate misstep to create something productive.

This paper offers an explanation of why the Plagiarism Intervention Program was created, including how the administrators of the writing center obtained buy-in from the Office of Student Conduct and Integrity, how the curriculum was designed, and the roles tutors played in both designing and implementing the program. Information is also provided on the challenges and successes with which the program has met. Finally, suggestions for implementing plagiarism intervention programs on other campuses will be given, as will ideas for how to further assess such programs using both qualitative and quantitative measures.

### **Program Inception**

Until 2015, Indiana State left the handling of plagiarism cases to Student Conduct and Integrity, who generally punished it with a warning to go along with the failed assignment (and possibly class). At the second offense, the student was in danger of being removed from the university. These punitive measures have long been the standard. After all, our students are told time and time again that plagiarism is wrong and will not be tolerated. Yet it continues to happen. When it happened in the Math and Writing Center, the staff began to question the way this issue is handled. What's more, we began to wonder if we could do more to stop it. After all, as Stephanie Bell (2017) notes, learning centers are ideally positioned to help address the problem of student plagiarism. This is especially

the case for writing centers that are led by tutoring professionals or administrators. Though faculty members are often tasked with running writing centers and often make brilliant directors, a plagiarism intervention program like this one is likely to gain buy-in from faculty members across campus if the person overseeing the center is not themselves a faculty member. An administrator who is trained in issues of plagiarism and also student conduct is a neutral party who will never see a student come in for plagiarism, then turn up in their own class. For that reason, it is possible that an administrator running the lab could be perceived as less biased towards students turned in for plagiarism.

Not only can faculty members view the learning center as neutral ground, but students may also view this space in the same way. Learning centers are out-of-classroom support, which makes them less intimidating for students. Sometimes when a student is caught plagiarizing, he or she complains that the professor simply does not like them. Tension is created between the faculty member and student. Because the learning center or writing center is not directly involved in that relationship, the workers there are able to take an outside perspective on the situation.

In ISU's case, a writing tutor caught plagiarizing was the catalyst for change. The administrative staff had to decide whether it was ever acceptable for a student who had been caught committing academic dishonesty to continue helping other students with their writing and, if so, how this could be used as an educational moment. Instead of firing the plagiarizing tutor, the MWC coordinator and I had a conversation with the tutor to see if she might be willing to use her experience to help others in order to keep her job, given that she never plagiarized again. She agreed, and the Plagiarism Intervention Program was born.

### **Program Design**

The initial idea brainstormed between me, the center coordinator, the faculty member for whom we were to present, and the tutor, was to create a series of three appointments for students who had plagiarized. Based on this general idea, the project was given to an MWC Writing Graduate Assistant, who was tasked with

fleshing out the details of the curriculum, creating any documents to be used in the sessions, and training the other writing tutors on how to perform a plagiarism intervention. It is important to note that all students working in the MWC have gone through FERPA training standard to university student workers, faculty, and staff, as well as more extensive in-center training on confidentiality and handling sensitive information. The MWC is CRLA certified and upholds that organization's standards of confidentiality.

The Plagiarism Intervention Program is based on the concept that preemptively teaching students proper writing skills, as well as how to use sources responsibly, will decrease the number of plagiarized papers turned in (Chankova, 2017). The program also supports the theory that understanding plagiarism should not be framed so much as a moral issue, but as a part of learning to write well (Lee, Anderson & Spronken-Smith, 2017). The fact that students are talking about plagiarism with a peer allows them to open up and have a more casual, honest conversation than they might with a professor or student conduct professional. Finally, the program addresses the need for campus-wide support for faculty dealing with plagiarism (Vehvilainen, Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2018). A campus with robust plagiarism support should offer training for faculty, software to help identify it (we use Turnitin), a student conduct office with a streamlined process for reporting, and a learning or writing center that can help talk to students about the issue so that the faculty member is not left alone in dealing with the problem. The ISU Math and Writing Center fulfills this last role on campus.

During the creation of the curriculum, the staff involved determined that each appointment would be with the same tutor so that they and the student could develop at least a basic level of trust over the course of the meetings. As the program changed over time, this was no longer possible, but meeting with the same tutor is still ideal. In the first meeting, the student presents the plagiarized paper to the tutor, and the two discuss what about the assignment constituted plagiarism. The student also completes a self-evaluation of his or her writing (Appendix A), which allows the tutor to better focus the sessions. The student and tutor discuss the self-evaluation and choose two to three areas on which their meetings

will focus. Throughout the session, the tutor may also refer to the PI Reformatting document (Appendix B) which offers suggestions for topics to cover in the sessions. Together, the pair decides on two to three issues from the Reformatting document that deserves their focus. Since it is not possible to cover all the issues listed in just three sessions, this prioritization requires careful thinking about which skills will benefit the student the most in his or her future academic career.

Aside from determining how the student feels about their writing, the tutor must also determine whether the plagiarism was accidental or intentional, as this sets the course of the rest of the session. If the offense was accidental, for example, a student had incorrectly cited information, the tutor covers the rules for how to cite properly. If the student intentionally cheated, the conversation instead turns to the ethics of plagiarism and its implication in the academic community, as well as for the student.

During the second appointment, the student and tutor work on the particular issues that led to the plagiarism. For students who copied or bought work because they were not confident in their own skills, the sessions aim to build up their confidence. For those with citation problems, the sessions involve learning how to consult resources that help students cite in whatever format their professor requires. During the third session, the tutor and student begin correcting and re-writing the plagiarized paper. The faculty member decides whether or not they want to offer the student any credit for this revision. At the end of each session, the tutor writes comprehensive notes in the center's online system, which allows the tutor to remember what they were working on during the intervention, as there may be several days between appointments. The notes also allow anyone reading (the coordinator or other tutors) to see the focus of the meeting. In cases where the student does not always get to see the same tutor, session notes allow communication regarding what has already been covered and what still needs to be covered in sessions.

### **Collaborating with Faculty**

In the first year, this arrangement depended on individual faculty

members across campus referring their plagiarizing students to the MWC, though after a year, the Office of Student Conduct began automatic referrals. About a dozen professors from various departments began using the service regularly, calling to check up or requiring proof of attendance for their students who went through the program. As word of the new service spread through word of mouth, some faculty members who admitted to not having confidence in identifying plagiarism asked if they could refer students they merely suspected of plagiarizing, to which we agreed after researching whether this violated any of our university handbooks (which it does not).

As research shows, it is vital for faculty to be able to talk with colleagues like writing center directors about student plagiarism, and as the writing center staff is all trained in confidentiality and FERPA, as well as writing issues, they provide safe outlets for these conversations (Vehvilainen, Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2017). Scholars who study plagiarism have found that faculty worldwide are often reluctant to turn in plagiarism because they do not feel comfortable identifying it, or they worry that the process of reporting it will be overly taxing. Others fear that the repercussions for the student will be entirely out of their control (Adele, 2017; Stowe, 2017; Vehvilainen, Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2017). Writing center tutors at Indiana State University became adept at leading conversations that would quickly reveal whether the student cheated – this is usually done primarily through asking the student a series of detailed questions about their paper and their writing process. Some try to cover up the offense, while others are eager to admit to a peer that the work is not really their own. A tutor is much less threatening than a professor, as they have no control over the student's grade.

Some professors choose to contact the MWC directly before going through Student Conduct and Integrity, not wishing to formally turn the student in but recognizing that he or she needs assistance in order to not cheat again. This is often the case with faculty who teach first-year courses. Those teaching capstone classes are more likely to turn the case in to Student Conduct, then follow up directly with the MWC, though the reason for this is unknown.

Collaboration with Student Conduct

After 45 to 50 students had completed the program – more than anticipated – the coordinator and I decided to have a conversation with Student Conduct and Integrity’s director. We talked with him about what we were doing and found the idea well received. The Student Conduct and Integrity Office opted to mandate the intervention for all students accused of plagiarism starting the following fall. Importantly, they also decided to place a hold on the account of any student who had been caught plagiarizing, but who had not yet gone through the program. This would clearly signal to the student that the university takes academic integrity offenses very seriously, as they cannot register for classes with a hold on their account. Within that next year, the number of students going through the program more than tripled to roughly 150. As a result, the team of graduate assistants was tasked with formalizing the intervention curriculum and training all of the center’s twenty-two writing tutors to hold plagiarism sessions. Student Conduct agreed to help us assess the program by providing us with recidivism rates for all students who went through the program.

During the three years in which the program has been in place, recidivism rates have steadily dropped (see Table 1). The number of students who finish the Plagiarism Intervention Program and repeat the offense is now less than 1%. This initial look at the data on student recidivism indicates that the program may have a positive impact on students. The staff of the MWC is optimistic that the content of the intervention itself is responsible for keeping students from plagiarizing, as students who did not understand how not to plagiarize learn how to avoid it, and those who intentionally plagiarized understand by the end why it is wrong and what could happen if it continues. This outcome can be examined in future years through the surveying of students who have completed the program. It is also, of course, possible that other factors are at play: students do not like having to spend three hours going through the program, and they may assume if they do it again, they will have to spend more time. They may also feel embarrassed by having to talk to another student about their offense. Either way, results are promising enough to continue the program with increased qualitative and quantitative assessment efforts.

Table 1

*Recidivism Rates Since Plagiarism Intervention Program Inception*

<u>Year</u>	<u># of Plagiarism Cases</u>	<u>Repeat Offenses</u>	<u>Recidivism Rate</u>
2015-16	92	6	6.52%
2016-17	111	4	3.60%
2017-18	101	1	0.9%

**Impact on the MWC**

The Plagiarism Intervention Program has impacted the Math and Writing Center and those who work there. For one, the center has had to allocate a significant amount of student wages to the program, given that over 300 hours per year are dedicated to designing the curriculum, training new tutors to deliver the program, meeting with the students, and following up with faculty and Student Conduct. For this reason, the coordinator of the center approached Student Conduct to ask if they might be able to sponsor a graduate assistant or a dedicated tutor to work primarily with this program. While this request was met with a positive response from the Student Conduct and Integrity director, a Vice President had to be petitioned for the funding. Unfortunately, the university's current budget crisis has prevented funding being offered so far; the MWC director will continue to follow up yearly with the Director of the Office of Student Conduct and Integrity.

The presence of the PIP program has been an excellent marketing tool for the center. Faculty who were not aware of the center now learn about it when they turn a student in for plagiarism. Some faculty who did not refer students to the service before now do so because they have worked with a writing tutor to discuss the student's issue, and they have a better understanding of how the center works and increased trust in the work done there.

Increased marketing has also occurred because students who visit the center for plagiarism intervention become aware of the other support and services offered there. If they are already visiting

to talk about their writing, they are more likely to come back to get help on another paper or in their math class. Overall, the increased visibility of the MWC has been positive, as has the furthered respect given the center, as it is seen as fulfilling a more academic role than most support centers because it now handles such a challenging issue. Thus far, students have not attached a negative stigma to the center, possibly because students who have not been turned in for plagiarism generally do not know that the center conducts the plagiarism intervention service.

### **Challenges**

Implementing the PIP program came with several surmountable challenges. Firstly, tutors had to be carefully trained on how to deal with plagiarism issues, especially when the student was hesitant to admit that he or she plagiarized. Tutors are not and should not be in the business of establishing plagiarism cases- the tutor's challenge is to get the student to open up about the issue and understand that the tutor is not there to punish them, but to help them address the problem. Though some tutors were initially uncomfortable in their first session of plagiarism intervention, they are all now adept at helping those students and gaining their trust.

On a more practical level, the MWC faced challenges in scheduling these appointments. Students are often turned in for plagiarism at the end of the semester, which is already the center's busiest time. While the center usually runs on a drop-in, first-come, first-served basis, the plagiarism intervention programs were initially scheduled so that the faculty member was aware of when the student would visit, and so that the student was more likely to show up. However, when the center received a rush of 50 plagiarism intervention appointments, with three sessions each, tutors felt like they were prioritizing those students over those who come in to get help with their papers. Many plagiarism intervention students also failed to show up for their appointments, which meant the tutor wasted 15 to 20 minutes waiting for them when they could have been helping another student.

To avoid inefficiency, and to make sure certain students were not prioritized over others, the MWC shifted to drop-in

for all appointments, including interventions. Though students sometimes do not like having to wait a few minutes for a tutor to become available, this model has overall worked extremely well. Students usually bring a book or homework and just study until a tutor is free. This change has also led to students sometimes working with different tutors for each of the three sessions. In this case, the session notes and open communication between the tutors are invaluable, as they can quickly get up to speed on where the student is in the process of learning about plagiarism and correcting their work. After the sessions have ended, the graduate assistant in charge of the program contacts the professor and Student Conduct and Integrity to update them on their work with the student. At that time, the professor may choose to accept the re-written paper, and Student Conduct and Integrity indicates on the student's file that he or she completed the program.

### **Assessing the Program**

While some initial assessment of the program has been conducted, including Student Conduct and the Writing Center analyzing recidivism rates as noted above, more work could be done in this area. There are a variety of both quantitative and qualitative strategies for approaching the question of whether this program is successful. So far, the Indiana State University Math & Writing Center has used surveys and usage data to track the program's impact. The center's coordinator wrote a survey that she distributed to the email addresses of all 101 students who completed plagiarism intervention in 2017-18. Fifteen students responded. In the survey, students were asked about their confidence in avoiding plagiarism going forward, whether they felt the program was helpful, and how the program could be improved. Results were positive, with most students stating that they found the program helpful.

Students were asked when surveyed to rate how confident they felt in their ability to avoid plagiarizing going forward. Of the 15 respondents, 14 stated "Definitely yes" to the statement "I am confident in my ability to avoid plagiarizing in the future." One student stated "Somewhat." No students stated that they were "not really", "absolutely not" confident, or "unsure." When asked whether

the sessions were helpful, five students responded that they were “extremely” helpful, while six said they were “moderately” so and two stated that they felt “neutral” about the sessions’ helpfulness. Students were then asked to respond to the statement “What I learned from the sessions has changed my behavior or writing process in some way.” Seven students responded that they strongly agree with the statement, five moderately agreed, one was neutral, and two disagreed. These responses, though they represent a small n, indicate that students generally have a positive reaction to the plagiarism intervention program. This is somewhat surprising, as the authors had anticipated that students may feel resentment for having to take the time to attend, or they may feel as if they were being unfairly punished. This is especially true given that nine of the respondents claimed that they “accidentally plagiarized”, with only five stating they “knowingly plagiarized” and one stating that they “did not plagiarize.”

MWC usage trends among students who used the plagiarism intervention program are also positive. In the same survey, students were asked whether they had used the Math & Writing Center before visiting for plagiarism intervention. Most had not, but two students who indicated they had never used it before going on to visit the center multiple times for help with assignments after completing the plagiarism intervention. 7 additional respondents who had never used the center before indicated that, after completing the program, they would use the center for help with future assignments. Students seem to not hold any ill will towards the center after being forced to go through the program, and most had encouraging things to say when asked to write in how the program could be improved. Comments included “it was amazing,” “it’s perfect as is,” the suggestion that tutors could “help you to understand how to plan out an essay”, “online scheduling,” and “I honestly don’t know.” When asked for any additional feedback, one student said the program was “excellent”, while another stated “the tutors cut right to the chase and focused on my needs. Overall, it was a great learning experience.” Overall, the authors were surprised at the positive responses collected and hope to expand the survey, as well as the number of respondents, in the future.

In addition to student-perception, a larger-scale study on usage post plagiarism intervention would be beneficial. It would be easy to pull the names of all students who have gone through the program since its inception and search the tutoring database to see how many of those students continued to use the service after their intervention. Conversely, it would be telling if students who had previously used the center discontinued use after the intervention program. With faculty involvement, it would also be possible to study the quality of student writing after the plagiarism intervention program. While the recidivism rate indicates that students are generally not plagiarizing after they get caught the first time, it would be good to know whether the overall quality of their writing improves after the 3-session plagiarism program.

### **Replicating the Program**

The results of Indiana State University's plagiarism intervention program show that the program is worth replicating at other universities that have a writing center or lab. In addition to being a great bridge between student support and student conduct, the program seems to be beneficial for the students who participate. Because fewer students are repeating the offense, fewer students are being dismissed for academic integrity reasons, which means the school is better poised to retain them.

The first step in replicating this program is for the writing center director to approach the director of student conduct (or similar unit on campus) with full knowledge of plagiarism trends on campus. Ideally, the directors would contribute graduate assistants from both their areas, who would create a curriculum unique to their students and needs together. This would ensure that student conduct is well invested in the project and more likely to offer monetary and personnel support. Though the writing center would most likely be delivering the intervention (perhaps with the help of some student conduct workers), both units should play an active role in advertising the service to faculty. This can be done during new faculty orientation. Both units would also be involved in assessing the program. The writing center is well poised to supply data from tutor comment forms, as well as usage information. Student Conduct

can provide recidivism rates. Ideally, Student Conduct would be willing to do what is done here at ISU – place a hold on the accounts of students who have not taken the necessary steps towards resolving their plagiarism issue.

In general, we have found that outside of the hours spent actually working with the students, managing this program is not particularly time-consuming. The initial creation of a curriculum may take several weeks of work for a graduate assistant, but once this is created, the program tends to run smoothly and efficiently. Collecting data is not particularly strenuous, and reporting on the program's success has been easy. Because plagiarism is an issue that is already on the minds of so many chairs, deans, and administrators, this is a program that looks great in the portfolio of both the writing center and student conduct. Most importantly, this is a program that allows students the chance to learn from their mistakes, correct them, and continue on to have a successful career in college.

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## Appendix A

### Self-Evaluation of Writing Skills

**Directions:** Read the summary for each category below, and then rank each

catc

1	2	3	4
Brand new or confusing information	Recognizable information	Known information	Well known information

#### \_\_\_\_\_ Structure/Organization

The structure and organization of an essay provides a skeleton for the content. This includes having clear sections (introduction, body, conclusion) and transitioning from one section to another.

#### \_\_\_\_\_ Evaluating Sources

Evaluating sources examines whether sources are credible, contain bias, and have confirmed, relevant content. This also includes assessing the platform or medium (print, online, etc.) of the source.

#### \_\_\_\_\_ Citing

Whenever information from an outside source (anything you did not create) is used, it must be cited in the paper using MLA, APA or another citation style. Each style has its own unique format for in-text and final references.

#### \_\_\_\_\_ Including source material/content

Using source information to support ideas adds credibility to an argument. Outside information can be added through summary, paraphrase, or quotation, and knowing when to use which form helps with the flow of an essay.

#### \_\_\_\_\_ Prewriting/Planning

Setting aside time to write and developing short-term goals for writing can help make writing easier. Creating webs or outlines to review the organization of an essay also helps improve the flow and comprehensibility of written work.

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Based on the answers above and discussion of the topics, the following 2-3 categories have been chosen for review during the PI sessions:

## Appendix B

### Plagiarism Intervention Session Categories

#### Writing Structure & Organization

- Introduction
- Thesis Statement
- Body Paragraphs
- Topic Sentences
- Conclusion
- Transitions & Flow

#### Evaluating Sources

- Credibility of Source(s)
- Evaluating content of source
- Platform/Medium of source
- Review for bias & exaggeration

#### Citing

- When to cite
- In-text citations
- References/works cited
- Formatting

#### Including source material/content

- Paraphrasing
- Summarizing
- Quoting
- o When to use each
- Combining info from sources
- Transitioning to source content

#### Prewriting/Planning

- Outlining
- Webbing/brainstorming
- Time management