Book Review: My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture
Susan D. Blum (Cornell, 2009)

Elizabeth Young, Washington College

Plagiarism is a plague sweeping across academia as evidenced by stats such as "68 percent [of college students] admit to cutting and pasting material from the Internet without citation" (p. 1). If this epidemic is to be contained, it must first be understood. As an anthropologist, this is Susan D. Blum's primary objective in her book *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*. Blum examines the causes and complexities of plagiarism and then offers solutions. As explained in the introduction, her research stems from an ethnographic case study conducted between February 2005 and March 2007. Blum worked closely with four undergraduate student researchers who met with over 200 peers to discuss life at the University of Notre Dame (referred to by Blum as Saint U). Student researchers asked their peers a wide range of questions about the many academic and social aspects of college. These questions addressed their extracurricular activities, music downloading habits, quoting of movies and TV shows, research and writing practices, and understanding of academic integrity (p. 7-8).

So why do students plagiarize? Blum's research reveals both expected and unexpected reasons. Not surprisingly, confusion and ignorance are leading causes of plagiarism. Students do not know how to cite properly, and ponder what paraphrasing means and how to do it properly. Confusion also stems from differing definitions of plagiarism across disciplines (p. 14). Pinpointing the grey areas of plagiarism creates a challenge, and Blum includes a helpful chart on page 27 detailing these various levels, such as patchwriting (copying from a source and then shuffling/deleting just a few words and replacing single words with synonyms). Often allusions to literature are not cited, as Blum illustrates with Julius Caesar's words: I came, I saw, I conquered (p. 13). A more relevant example for millennials involves the habit of quoting popular TV shows and movies in conversation without providing a reference because it is assumed to be understood. They quote this popular culture to connect with peers, and since they don't see anything wrong with this behavior (nor should they, in a non-academic environment), they may struggle with why this practice is unacceptable when writing a paper (p. 41-4). Students don't realize that they are writing for a wider audience. In addition to unintentional plagiarism, Blum examines the social roots of intentional plagiarism. For example, students' work commitments contribute to plagiarism, perhaps an overlooked factor. Blum highlights that ap-

proximately half of full-time students work, and on top of all of their social commitments, school work is only a part of the puzzle (p. 4). Because plagiarism can help students accomplish their goals—good grades and a degree—they sometimes feel it is worth the risk of getting caught or suspended (p. 140).

As she examines the plagiarism plague, Blum looks for patterns in student interpretations of originality and collaboration. She elaborates: "[T]he procedure for following the rules is quite murky, for professional writers as much as for student novices, because the rules unrealistically assume an ability to trace the origins of all our thoughts and utterances" (p. 30). Blum also discusses the "collective authorship" of Wikipedia, which does not always include citations (p. 70-1). Moreover, the role of collaboration muddies the waters of plagiarism, especially since so much emphasis in today's academia focuses on collaborative group work (p. 90). Therefore, the question arises: How much involvement should friends have in writing a student's paper (p. 55-6)? Blum's case study shows that students prize friendship above all else, so it comes as no surprise that the desire to help out a friend trumps academic integrity (p. 156-7).

Blum offers several solutions to the plagiarism problem in her last chapter "No Magic Bullet: Deconstructing Plagiarism," as well as in the conclusion. First and foremost, she proposes education; using software like TurnItIn is not enough! Students require instruction on how to quote both direct and indirect sources, paraphrase, and cite (p. 169). Plagiarism instruction should be on-going, and Blum suggests forums on plagiarism for both faculty and students, in which black and white scenarios, as well as grey areas of plagiarism can be discussed (p. 177). Blum also has deep concerns about over-programmed college students and emphasizes: "[t]he only genuine solution is to lower the water table and return the youth of our society to drier, calmer ground, where they can hop, skip, and jump rather than cut, paste, and graduate" (p. 180).

By offering citation assistance and discussing plagiarism with students, many librarians already are actively engaged in working on the plagiarism cure. By making students aware of online citation tools such as OWL at Purdue and Diana Hacker's Research and Documentation

Online during information literacy sessions, librarians can lessen the number of students who claim ignorance as an excuse for plagiarism. Additionally, librarians can link to library-produced videos on plagiarism and offer workshops (ideally, timed so they will be as close to "point of need" as possible based on the schedule of key classes) on RefWorks, EndNote, Zotero, etc. and once students realize that the library offers training on free, time-saving ways to store and create their citations they will be all ears. However, perhaps most importantly, more discussions with students are needed about what collaborative behaviors are acceptable (e.g., reading a paper to check for grammar) and unacceptable (e.g., reading a paper to re-arrange the paragraphs and change sentences). After all, academic integrity falls into the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, specifically Standard Five: "The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses the information ethically and legally" (ALA 2000, p. 14).

Blum provides much food for thought on the subject of plagiarism for beginning and experienced librarians. For the last three years, I, as an information literacy librarian, have incorporated a plagiarism session into the first-year seminar program and advocate for education and prevention, not merely detection and punishment. Blum found that those who do avoid plagiarism do so out of fear rather than an understanding of why plagiarism is wrong (p. 163). Therefore, in the future, beyond stating the serious academic penalties that result from plagiarism, I plan to spend more time discussing the rationale for citing sources (e.g., to join the academic discourse), and I may even incorporate some of her research on the history of footnotes. Also, by explicitly empathizing (though not justifying) that students' busy schedules might cause them to want to cut corners, I can focus on how tools like RefWorks allow them to save time **and** do ethical, high-quality work.

Even though Blum ultimately raises more questions than she answers, her enlightening text on plagiarism and college culture sheds a unique perspective on this issue. By reading her book, librarians teaching information literacy gain insight into why students plagiarize and can then strategize on how to best address this problem given the culture and resources of their academic institution.

References

Association of College and Research Libraries. 2000. *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*. American Library Association. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf

Mark your calendars!

**Fiesta de Excelencia:
Celebrating Excellence in Library Instruction**