

## White Paper

### Plagiarism and Research Misconduct

December 15, 2010

by Standing Committee on Faculty Conduct

Harvard Medical School, Harvard School of Dental Medicine

#### **Executive Summary:**

The Standing Committee on Faculty Conduct has developed the following statement to the Harvard Medical School (HMS) community with the goal of ensuring that everyone in the community understands what constitutes plagiarism in order to avoid this serious breach of academic standards and, in some cases, of federal rules.

Plagiarism, which can be a form of scientific misconduct, is generally described as the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit, thereby misleading the reader with respect to the contributions of the author. See <http://www.hms.harvard.edu/integrity/miscond.html>; <http://ori.dhhs.gov/policies/plagiarism.shtml>. Allegations of plagiarism are investigated by the HMS Standing Committee on Faculty Conduct according to University statutes and federal guidelines. Plagiarism has been detected in a great variety of settings at HMS, and has been committed by all levels of trainees and faculty. Conditions predisposing to plagiarism include failure to understand the definition of plagiarism, ease of text manipulation, time pressure, over commitment, poor supervision of trainees, and underestimation of its seriousness. Sanctions imposed on the individual after a finding of plagiarism have included censure, retraction of journal articles or grants, or termination of Harvard academic appointments. Failure of oversight by mentors or department heads

has led to monitoring or suspension of supervisory activity and requisite revision of departmental curricula.

## **I. Introduction**

The HMS Standing Committee on Faculty Conduct (Standing Committee) prepared this document to alert the HMS community as to the various types of plagiarism, the situations that place faculty and trainees at risk for this behavior, and the seriousness of the offense as construed by University statutes and federal guidelines. We hope that this information will serve an educational and preventive function.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. What is plagiarism?**

It is important to stress that since plagiarism can be a form of research misconduct, cases that come before the Standing Committee are investigated according to HMS's Principles and Procedures for Dealing with Allegations of Faculty Misconduct (see <http://www.hms.harvard.edu/integrity/miscond.html>). Whenever federal funds are involved, these investigations are also governed by the federal guidelines promulgated by the Public Health Service, and implemented by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) in the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Research misconduct as defined by ORI and HMS policy includes not only fabrication and falsification of data but also plagiarism, because in all of these cases, the intent is to mislead the scientific community about the origin of words and ideas. If the act of plagiarism, or other alleged impropriety, is the result of honest error or mistake, it

---

<sup>1</sup> The Standing Committee on Faculty Conduct would like to particularly thank Miles F. Shore, M.D., Julie Buring, Sc.D., and Ellen Berkman, J.D. for their contributions to this effort.

may not rise to the level of research misconduct under the federal guidelines. However, honest errors and mistakes are difficult to distinguish from intentional plagiarism in the absence of careful and thorough investigation. For that reason, all allegations of plagiarism are treated seriously by HMS and are subject to intensive scrutiny and analysis by the Standing Committee charged with investigating all allegations of faculty academic impropriety. In every instance, the investigation results in unavoidable anxiety and embarrassment for those accused of plagiarism, as well as substantial time and effort expended by those accused in responding to the allegations. In addition, there is a considerable cost in time and effort by members of the faculty who are enlisted to assist in the investigation, and by the staff of the Office for Professional Standards and Integrity (OPSI) and the Standing Committee.

The federal ORI defines plagiarism as follows:

“As a general working definition, ORI considers plagiarism to include both the theft or misappropriation of intellectual property and the substantial unattributed textual copying of another’s work. It does not include authorship or credit disputes.

The theft or misappropriation of intellectual property includes the unauthorized use of ideas or unique methods obtained by a privileged communication, such as a grant or manuscript review.

Substantial unattributed textual copying of another's work means the unattributed verbatim or nearly verbatim copying of sentences and paragraphs which materially mislead the ordinary reader regarding the contributions of the author. ORI generally does not pursue the limited use of identical or nearly identical phrases which describe a commonly used methodology or previous research because ORI does not consider such use as substantially misleading to the reader or of great significance.”

See <http://ori.dhhs.gov/policies/plagiarism.shtml>.

If you use identical language or another researcher's ideas, you must include appropriate citations and, in some circumstances, enclose the material in quotation marks or indent the material, as appropriate. The question for anyone examining allegations of plagiarism will be whether it is clear from your work which ideas and language are your own and which ideas and language are someone else's.

HMS's approach to allegations of plagiarism is consistent with ORI's definition.

See <http://hms.harvard.edu/public/coi/policy/misconduct.html>. Please be mindful that various sponsors may have broader definitions or interpretations that must be followed.

### **III. Is this plagiarism?**

Sometimes, plagiarism is obvious:

- A faculty member copies a paragraph from another researcher's manuscript without citation.
- A faculty member presents at a conference and represents another researcher's data as his or her own.

- A faculty member includes in his or her own grant application ideas and background information from a grant application available to him or her as an assigned grant reviewer.

However, sometimes plagiarism is not so obvious:

- A faculty member copies several paragraphs from another researcher's published manuscript, cites the article in the bibliography, but does not indicate that the material is a direct quotation.
- A faculty member publishes a book that includes articles written by others. Although she credits the authors with a general acknowledgement, she does not indicate who wrote which article.
- A faculty member, who is a consultant on a colleague's NIH grant application, copies portions of the NIH grant in his own new grant proposal and does not discuss with, or obtain permission from, the principal investigator of the original application.
- At a national meeting or in a classroom exercise or seminar, a faculty member projects a slide that includes material from a published paper or someone else's lecture, but does not attribute the slide to the author.
- A faculty member preparing a review article copies passages from a previous review article written by another researcher and simply updates the article with recently published material. He does not reference the original article because, he contends, it was not a report of original research.

- A faculty member copies significant portions of his or her own publication in a new manuscript submitted to a different journal. He or she does not indicate within his or her new submission that the data was submitted to and/or published previously by another journal.

#### **IV. Where and how is plagiarism detected?**

The Standing Committee has investigated allegations of plagiarism in virtually every imaginable setting. We have seen allegations made in connection with articles intended for publication in journals, in grant applications, and in draft research submissions. Plagiarism has been alleged in textbooks and review articles, in oral presentations at national and international meetings, in class presentations, and in the preparation of class syllabi. Plagiarism allegations have arisen in connection with written words and with figures and images. The unattributed copying of others' material constitutes plagiarism wherever the language appears. It may seem less egregious to use another's words or figures in such places as classroom exercises or presentations, rather than grant applications and articles in prestigious journals, but all allegations of plagiarism must be investigated and resolved by the same procedures. Wherever plagiarism is alleged, the allegation must be taken seriously and investigated thoroughly.

Sometimes we learn about the allegations from outside reviewers or attendees at conferences or classes. Other times we learn of them through colleagues in the labs or readers of journals, review articles, and textbooks. They recognize their own unattributed work in the purported work of others. Individuals accused of plagiarism have been

students, clinical and research fellows, junior faculty members, and senior faculty members.

#### **V. What conditions predispose to plagiarism?**

As we have investigated allegations of plagiarism, we have noticed some common factors that seem to contribute to the behavior. By alerting the community to these risk factors and predisposing conditions, we hope to reduce the instances of plagiarism.

- **Ease of Text Manipulation.** Thanks to the ubiquity of computers, plagiarism is only a few keystrokes away from academic integrity. When it is possible to transfer whole chunks of text effortlessly from one document to another, the urge to use the work of others is facilitated. Even if the intent is honest, word processing makes it more difficult to distinguish between one's own and another author's ideas and phrases. As an example, an individual may have copied text from another person's paper to use as a placeholder; then forgotten to rework those sections to express their ideas in their own words. This practice also overlooks the fact that the arrangement and presentation format of material may have unique significance that is as much the property of the original author as are the words and ideas.
- **Perceived Non-substantive Sections of Writings.** Even if investigators pay careful attention to the more substantive aspects of a paper – the findings or conclusions – they may overlook plagiarism in what they perceive to be the less substantive aspects of the paper – the review of previous work on which the study is based, or the description of the study design or methods. Special care must be

- taken to review meticulously not only those portions of a paper that contain novel discoveries or ideas, but also those sections that lay the foundation for the work.
- **Time Pressure.** The Standing Committee appreciates the feeling that there is always a looming deadline. These deadlines, whether real or perceived, cause researchers to rush, and rushing may result in mistakes that could include failure of attribution for the statements or ideas of others. When investigators feel rushed they must be especially diligent to review their work carefully prior to submission to ensure its originality.
  - **Responsibility for Supervisees.** Most HMS faculty members have assumed responsibility for training and supervising others, both individuals from the United States and from other countries. With that commitment comes a responsibility for teaching trainees about the importance of using one's own words and ideas and attributing those that come from others. It is important for HMS faculty to teach their supervisees that copying another person's work, even in a review article or IRB application, is considered serious academic misconduct and may result in allegations that are brought to the attention of the Standing Committee.
  - **The Diversity of Our Community.** Part of what makes HMS an exceptional place is the diversity of our community. While the majority of allegations of plagiarism that have surfaced at HMS have involved individuals whose native language is English, there have been some instances in which a lack of facility with the English language may have contributed to reliance on others' wording. It is particularly important for members of the HMS community to remember that



our faculty is, fortunately, an international one, and that not every member is a native English speaker. Nonetheless, we must all meet the same standards of academic scientific practice that includes the ability to express in our own words, our methods and novel ideas.

- **Being Overextended.** Working as they do in a culture that promotes intense competition and high achievement, HMS faculty may be particularly prone to taking on too many responsibilities. When they do, they are at risk of being unable to spend the time and devote the attention necessary to prepare satisfactory academic or scientific reports themselves, or to supervise diligently the work of others. Being overextended is a predisposing factor for committing plagiarism but not a justification or a mitigation. Taking on too many tasks not only affects one's own work, but also may interfere with the supervision of the work of others.
- **Limitations of Space.** The Standing Committee appreciates that it is rare for an article to be accepted by a journal without any suggested revisions. Editors and reviewers commonly suggest that the article be shortened, leading to eliminating references. Unless done very carefully, eliminating references may give rise to allegations of plagiarism. It is important when proofreading articles that have been reduced in length to make sure that non-original work is appropriately attributed.
- **Failure to Communicate.** It may seem surprising that collaborators in the same areas of research or researchers working on the same projects do not communicate with each other, but it happens. This failure can result in loss of confidence or distrust among colleagues that can easily turn into an allegation of misconduct. If

one has worked with a colleague on an article or grant application and wishes to use some of that material for another project, that intention should be communicated and discussed with the former collaborator, and permission, albeit informal, obtained.

## **VI. What are the consequences of allegations of plagiarism?**

Because fairness and transparency are fundamental to the HMS Principles and Procedures for Dealing with Allegations of Faculty Misconduct and the work of the Standing Committee, HMS faculty and staff devote considerable time and effort to the investigation of every allegation. The investigations that follow allegations of plagiarism take researchers away from their work. The process may require involvement of mentors or supervisors overseeing the research of those accused. Cases involving hospitals or other affiliated organizations may also engage legal and research staff from those institutions.

In most instances, three senior members of the faculty are appointed to a panel to conduct an initial exploration of the allegations. Relevant original laboratory or other data may be impounded to be scrutinized by the panel with the aid of the technical staff of the HMS Office of Professional Standards and Integrity. Witnesses, including the accused faculty member, are interviewed. Other publications of the faculty member may be investigated to see if they have been plagiarized as well. The report of the panel is made available to the accused member for comment. The matter will be further scrutinized by the Standing Committee, and ultimately by the Dean and/or the CEO of the affiliated institution.

Moreover, if the matter under review involves federal funding, HMS may also be required to report the matter to the appropriate federal agency. That body can then decide whether it wishes to pursue the matter further. Thus, an individual undergoing a misconduct investigation at HMS may also be subject to an independent investigation by an agency such as ORI.

Plagiarism is considered egregious misconduct and frequently results in serious sanctions. Journal or review articles have had to be retracted. In the most extreme cases of deliberate misconduct, faculty members have been asked to leave HMS. These sanctions to the faculty member are distinct from any imposed by the federal government for those matters that also fall within its jurisdiction. Where there has been a failure of oversight, HMS faculty have been asked to train their supervisees and submit their training materials to the panel or Standing Committee. In more egregious cases involving the failure to supervise, HMS faculty have had their mentoring responsibilities taken away or have been monitored for a period of time. Where we have seen weaknesses in departments, those departments have had to revise their curricula to include explicit discussions of basic academic principles.

## **VII. Contact Resources**

If you have any concerns or questions about how to handle allegations of plagiarism, you may wish to consult with HMS's Office of Professional Standards and Integrity (Gretchen Brodnicki, Dean for Faculty and Research Integrity) or the HMS/HSDM/HSPH Ombuds Office (Melissa Brodrick, Ombudsperson). These offices will be able to provide some guidance on how to approach this serious problem.