

## Strengthening Honor Codes through Plagiarism Detection

Plagiarism was a serious problem at the University of Colorado, despite an academic integrity system run by each of the university's schools. To address the situation,



### At a Glance

The success of the honor code at the University of Colorado at Boulder is built on three pillars:

- Putting students in charge of writing and enforcing the honor code
- Building a student/faculty partnership to foster a culture of academic integrity
- Using Turnitin to ensure compliance

they established a university-wide honor code, written by the students themselves, and adopted Turnitin to help enforce it. Now plagiarism is on the decline, and a culture of academic integrity is beginning to flourish.

### Honor System Shortcomings

Academic integrity was suffering at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Each of the university's schools had an ethics committee to investigate charges of academic dishonesty, but there was no uniformity in how standards were applied or enforced. There was also no mechanism for sharing information between schools regarding serial cheaters. And because it was faculty-run, the students had little investment in the system and therefore took it lightly.

To address these shortcomings, the University reinvented their approach to honor codes on campus. Instead of faculty-run ethics committees for each school, they established a Student Honor Code Council, serving the entire campus, which was responsible for writing the honor code and evaluating cases of honor code violations. The university administration, faculty, and student body all agreed that putting students in charge of the honor code was the surest way to establish a lasting culture of academic honesty.

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In 2000, under the University of Colorado's old academic integrity system, over half of students surveyed claimed to have direct knowledge of another student cheating. After instituting a new student-run honor code, and implementing Turnitin, Professor Luftig has seen incidents of plagiarism in his classes drop to zero.

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## **Building a Foundation of Academic Integrity**

To support the new honor code and establish an effective and uniform means of plagiarism detection, the university made Turnitin available to every professor on campus. Business School Professor Jeff Luftig served as the faculty advisor to the Student Honor Code Council from its inception, and was instrumental in the decision to pair the new honor code with Turnitin.

According to Luftig, implementing an honor code on its own will do very little to fight plagiarism – there needs to be a detection mechanism to make sure that all students take the honor code seriously. “It’s naïve to think you can make the problem go away by just having an honor code,” says Luftig. “While you are building a culture of academic integrity you need a way to ensure that the code is being followed.”

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-Jeff Luftig, Faculty Advisor to Student Honor Code Council

The introduction of Turnitin in conjunction with the honor code had a dramatic and immediate effect. “I can tell you that in my personal experience as a faculty member, once students knew the system was going to be used, plagiarism significantly declined,” says Luftig. And where plagiarism still exists, it is easily identified.

In one striking case, Luftig used Turnitin to identify a cheatsite paper that had been submitted to a class at another university. When confronted with the indisputable evidence of a Turnitin Originality Report, the student exclaimed, “But that’s impossible! I paid extra for a paper that hadn’t been sold to anyone else.” Fortunately, Turnitin has made such instances increasingly rare.

## **Raising Academic Standards**

Beyond helping to identify cases of academic dishonesty, Turnitin also helps teach students about good academic standards. Of the approximately 150 papers flagged for plagiarism during the first year, many were cases of inadvertent plagiarism by students who simply exhibited poor scholarship.

This is an all too common problem, says Luftig, and solving it goes hand in hand with creating a culture of academic honesty. “Students may not know how to cite sources properly,” says Luftig. “We need to teach students to avoid sloppy scholarship, and Turnitin helps keep them on the straight and narrow.”

Fundamentally, the goal of the Student Honor Code Council is not to catch and punish cheaters, but rather to build a culture on campus where high ethical standards are expected and good scholarship is the norm. With plagiarism in Professor Luftig’s classes virtually eliminated, the students at the University of Colorado are well on their way to making that goal a reality.