

Anti-plagiarism website turns off students

By Jesse Rosenfeld, The McGill Daily

MONTREAL (CUP) -- As classes at McGill began last week, some students heard a new twist on the old plagiarism spiel: papers must be checked by a private online company to ensure that they haven't been plagiarized.

An anti-plagiarism website, Turnitin.com, checks academic papers against its own database and a number of "paper mill" web sites that sell pre-written papers to students.

The site is currently being used at McGill on a trial basis to determine its effectiveness and popularity.

Professor Sonia Laszlo has implemented the Turnitin system in her Economic Development class, a required course for students in McGill's International Development Studies program. Laszlo told her students that plagiarism creates bad blood between the faculty and students, and that the Turnitin site is the fastest and most effective way to confront the serious problem of plagiarism.

But many students have expressed concern and anger about the fact they must turn in their papers to a website in order to prove that they are not guilty of plagiarism. As well, many are also expressing deep concerns about having their papers on an online database.

International Development Studies and Political Science student Elise Legault, who is also an Arts Representative to the students' society, said that while she understands the administration's motives, she disagrees with the methods used by Turnitin.com.

"I understand that plagiarism is a problem and the university

wants to do something about it," she said. "I think there is also a problem with this program, because I also understand that it is a basic judicial principle in this country that you are innocent until proven guilty, and it should be that we have the same principle at school."

Wesley Jamieson, an economics and IDS student, believes the site will poison the academic climate at McGill.

"Turnitin.com makes students feel as if they are guilty until proven otherwise, and because of the academic atmosphere it creates, it makes students feel alienated from their professors," he said.

Students' Society VP University Affairs Vivian Choy said that the society is also concerned that students are being presumed guilty and are forced to prove their innocence.

"Last semester I was in a class where Turnitin.com was used, and at the end we were given a survey in which students reported no problems with the technical aspects of the site, but when it came to the comments section, students were saying things such as, 'How dare you subject me to this,' and 'How dare you assume I'm guilty before I even turn in my paper.'"

Legault added that the site may violate students' intellectual property rights.

"I am concerned about the idea of my essays floating around on the internet," Legault said. "Although I don't think that the web site has any intentions of misusing people's work, when your info is out on the internet, you never really know what could happen to it."

But Turnitin.com maintains that the company exists because schools themselves are unable to perform the same regulatory role. "In the absence of human resources

for extensive manual corroboration of student work, Turnitin provides a technological tool to achieve the same objective confirmation that student work is the student's work," reads a statement on the web site.

IDS Chair Myron Frankman recommended that outraged students begin by brushing up on their rights. Frankman added that he understands the objections students have raised to the Turnitin system. "Students should be assumed above suspicion unless that suspicion is aroused, and there are concerns that this site might call that into question," he said.

Choy argued that a system such as Turnitin.com is not the only effective way to guard against plagiarism, pointing out that many respected American universities

employ an honour system.

"SSMU is working on proposing alternatives to such a website, including an honour contract that students sign saying they won't plagiarize – a practice that's in place at American Ivy League schools."

Choy said she also plans to relay students' concerns to Laszlo in writing.

"There has been huge outrage from the Economic Development class, so I am currently in the process of writing to the prof about this issue," she said.

But for the time being, students will have to make do – Laszlo said she has no plans to abandon Turnitin.com as a mandatory policy in her class.

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