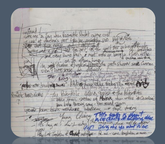
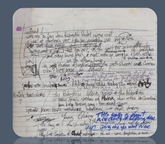


A Librarian in the Paper Mill: How Understanding the Custom Essay Writing Industry can Help Curb Plagiarism

Karson Jones, MLIS



BACKGROUND

As the theme of this year's conference suggests, new ideas and theories are everywhere, and libraries can be incubators and catalysts for their exchange and concrete manifestation. However, ideas are not only "tested, shaped, molded and evaluated"; they can also be borrowed, copied, stolen, and stunted. Drawing on two years spent working in the academic "paper mills," this poster presents an insider's perspective on the bespoke essay industry. The following are some of the research questions guiding this project:

- In what disciplines do students most often purchase custom papers?
- At what academic levels are fraudulent papers commonly submitted?
- Why do students reject available writing and research help in favor of ordering essays online?
- What can libraries do to better address academic dishonesty?

METHOD

The preliminary findings presented here are based on a sample of over 2000 orders for a variety of assignments submitted to one popular essay-writing company. The sample was collected at intervals over the course of 2014 and 2015. Orders for which the subject, academic level, and format were not specified were discarded, leaving a sample of 1083. These orders come from across the English-speaking world, but primarily from North America. Some of the subject areas and assignment types indicated in the original orders have been collapsed into broader categories.

ORDERING A PAPER

Ordering Process

Once a student finds a suitable website that offers custom-written assignments, they follow a process similar to that outlined below.

STEP 01

Specification
The client submits an initial order or request for quote, specifying topic, academic level, no. of pages, citation style, etc.

Pricing
Based on no. of pages, academic level, deadline, quality of writing, and other factors.

STEP 02

Order Board
The request is posted to an online order board and contract writers apply for or bid on the project. Clients can also request specific writers that they have worked with in the past.

Writer Assignment
The order is assigned based on bid, timing of application, writer qualifications, or client request. The assigned writer receives all materials related to the project.

STEP 03

Writing
If necessary, the writer negotiates the topic with the client, then researches and completes the project to specs.

Sources
Sometimes the client supplies e-books, electronic journal articles, or library database access at his/her institution. In other cases, the writer must locate the necessary resources.

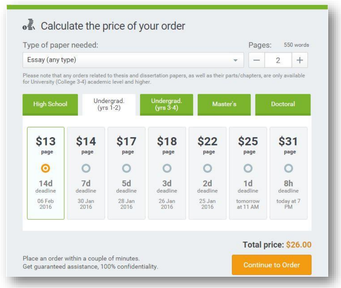
STEP 04

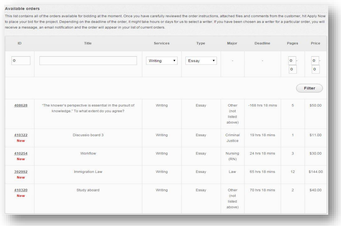
Delivery
The completed project is uploaded to the company website where it can be accessed by the client.

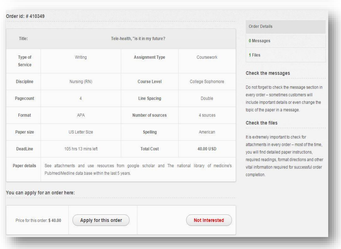
Other Materials
If the client requires copies of cited articles, data files, or other resources, these can be uploaded along with the assignment.

STEP 05

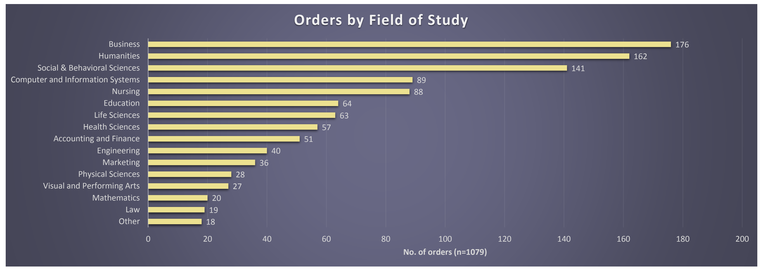
Revisions
If the final product does not meet the specifications, the client may request revisions from the writer.

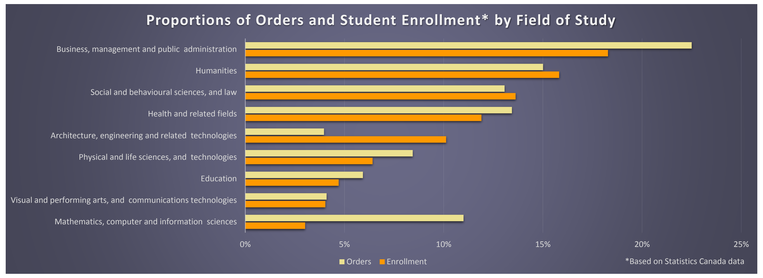


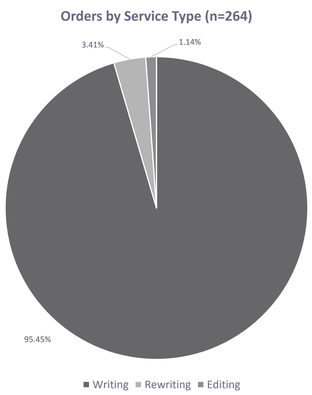


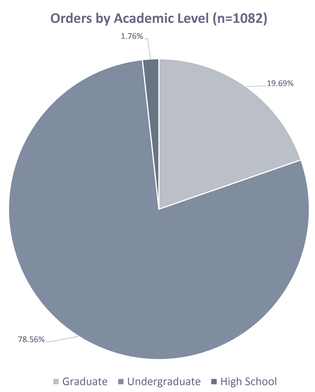


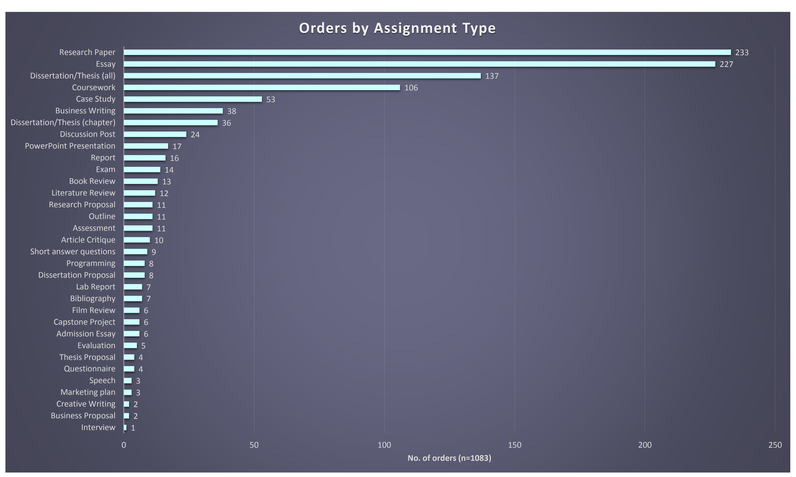
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS











PLAGIARISM DETECTION SYSTEMS

Why systems like Turnitin are not the answer:

- Hundreds of websites and thousands of contract writers are available to deliver made-to-order assignments. This is original content and will not be flagged in Turnitin originality reports. Students submitting these typically go undetected and unpunished.
- Studies have shown that Turnitin and similar systems are not even particularly good at catching overt plagiarism, missing as much as 40% of plagiarized content (Schorn, 2015). In addition, a variety of techniques can be used by savvy students to trick the system (Gillam, Marinuzzi, & Ioannou, 2011).
- Studies have shown that plagiarism detection systems often fail as a deterrent (Youmans, 2011).
- Turnitin does not identify plagiarism, but only similarity, and any flagged content must be investigated. Faculty are often reluctant to do this because of a lack of time, desire to avoid confrontation, fear of becoming wrapped up in administrative processes, and other factors (Hughes & McCabe, 2006).
- Turnitin itself is turning away from a focus on pure plagiarism detection to creating tools that assist students with writing and citation methods (Straumsheim, 2016).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutional Level

- Help shift a perspective of plagiarism as deviancy and the associated crime and punishment response to a more proactive approach that views all but the most egregious incidents of plagiarism as teaching opportunities.
- Work with faculty, administrators, academic integrity offices, writing centres, student advisors, and health services to plan a coordinated approach to plagiarism and other forms of cheating.
- Organize academic integrity awareness events on campus to raise the profile of the problem.

Faculty Level

- Work with faculty to construct modes of evaluation that are more resistant to plagiarism.
- Help faculty and administrators understand how plagiarism detection systems function and how best to employ them.
- Have liaison librarians help associated faculty investigate suspected cases of plagiarism.

Student Level

- Help students understand that their education is more than a means to an end, that they are participating in the accumulation of knowledge, and that academic fraud harms this goal.
- Help students understand that this type of dishonest behavior is no more acceptable in the business or professional world than it is in the academic (Trotta, 2013).
- Recognize that the purchase of essays is often a result of desperation, driven by increased student anxiety around success and other mental health issues (Laws, 2015).
- Reinforce the idea that most, if not all, students are capable of producing work that is equal to or better than the often substandard products of paper mills.

Library Level

- Understand the reasons for and modes of student plagiarism. Design and deliver more effective information literacy sessions to address the issues.
- As a deterrent, let students know during information literacy sessions that the institution is aware of the custom paper industry and the nature of its process and product.
- Focus information sessions on first and second year students to prevent patterns of academic dishonesty from developing.
- Target not only the students who are struggling, but also the high-achievers. These may be the most likely to plagiarize in order to maintain their academic standing (Geddes, 2011).
- International students are responsible for a disproportionate number of plagiarism cases (Bradshaw & Baluja, 2011). These students should be targeted to address language and cultural issues that might lead to more frequent cheating.
- Students in disciplines or departments/faculties that are more likely to plagiarize can be targeted for information literacy instruction.
- Help students interpret academic policies and procedures related to academic misconduct.

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