Students Rebel Against Database Designed to Thwart Plagiarists

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When McLean High School students write this year about Othello or immigration policy, their teachers won't be the only ones examining the papers. So will a California company that specializes in catching cheaters.

The for-profit service known as Turnitin checks student work against a database of more than 22 million papers written by students around the world, as well as online sources and electronic archives of journals. School administrators said the service, which they will start using next week, is meant to deter plagiarism at a time when the Internet makes it easy to copy someone else's words.

But some McLean High students are rebelling. Members of the new Committee for Students' Rights said they do not cheat or condone cheating. But they object to Turnitin's automatically adding their essays to the massive database, calling it an infringement of intellectual property rights. And they contend that the school's action will tar students at one of Fairfax County's academic powerhouses.

"It irked a lot of people because there's an implication of assumed guilt," said Ben Donovan, 18, a senior who helped collect 1,190 student signatures on a petition against mandatory use of the service. "It's like if you searched every car in the parking lot or drug-tested every student."

Questions about the legality and effectiveness of plagiarism detection services such as Turnitin are swirling beyond McLean High, another sign of the challenge educators face as they navigate benefits and problems the Internet has brought.

Fairfax school and Turnitin officials said lawyers for the company and various universities have concluded that the paper-checking system does not violate student rights. Many educators agree. Turnitin, a leader in the field, lists Georgetown University and the University of Maryland's University College among its clients. Others include some public schools in Montgomery, Prince George's, Loudoun and Arlington counties.

But three professors at Grand Valley State University in Michigan this month posted a letter online arguing that Turnitin "makes questionable use of student intellectual property." The University of Kansas last week decided to let its contract with Turnitin expire because of cost and intellectual property concerns. And the intellectual property caucus of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, an organization of 6,000 college-level educators, is debating whether such services "undermine students' authority over the uses of their own writing" and make them feel "guilty until proven innocent," according to a draft position statement.
"There's a lot of debate out there," said Rebecca Ingalls, a University of Tampa English professor who has analyzed Turnitin. "These students are giving their work to a company that's making money and they are getting no compensation."

Kimberly Carney, an assistant principal at McLean High, said there have been isolated cases of plagiarism at the 1,770-student school. The main reason administrators will use Turnitin is to teach students how to give proper credit to sources, Carney said.

"There wasn't a landmark thing that happened that we said we need to adopt this," Carney said. "Plagiarism is a problem at every high school nationwide."

The Fairfax County system began using Turnitin in 2003. More than three-fourths of the county's high schools now use the service.

The Center for Academic Integrity, affiliated with Duke University's Kenan Institute for Ethics, surveyed 18,000 public and private high school students over four years and found that more than 60 percent admitted to some form of plagiarism, according to a 2005 report.

Turnitin charges about 80 cents per student per year, according to a company official. Fairfax County paid between $24,000 and $30,000 in the last school year for the service, school system officials said.

Founder John M. Barrie said Turnitin evolved out of a Web site he created to facilitate peer review when he was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley. When fellow students complained about cheating classmates, Barrie helped develop a system to catch them. Turnitin's parent company, iParadigms LLC, of Oakland, Calif., was launched 10 years ago.

The service has grown dramatically, Barrie said, and is now used by more than 6,000 academic institutions in 90 countries. Barrie, who is president and chief executive of iParadigms, said 60,000 student assignments are added to the database daily. He said no student has ever launched a legal challenge.

Barrie said Turnitin helps protect the interests of honest students. The database is used only to compare papers, he said. "None of our clients want to catch cheaters," he said. "They all want to deter cheaters. Just like a proctor in an SAT exam or like a referee on a football field."

Dan Kent, a Loudoun County social studies teacher, called Turnitin necessary in a "cut-and-paste world." When Kent became department chair at Ashburn's Broad Run High School in 1999, he said, many teachers were reluctant to assign complex research papers because of the difficulty they encountered in checking for plagiarism.

These days, many Loudoun students submit rough drafts to Turnitin. They receive an "originality report" that identifies similarities to other sources and alerts the student and teacher. Teachers then eyeball the paper and decide if the material is properly cited.

Broad Run uncovered three instances of serious plagiarism in the first year it used Turnitin, Kent said, and other cases of poor paraphrasing that students failed to recognize as inappropriate. Since 2002, he said, the service has rooted out only three additional plagiarism cases at the school.

Carney said McLean High will use a similar approach. Students will be allowed to submit unlimited
numbers of drafts to the service to catch intentional or accidental overlaps. Only the final version will be graded. Students who refuse to use Turnitin will be given a zero on the assignment.

Carney predicted that McLean students would embrace the system eventually. "They'll see it's not a 'gotcha,'" she said.

But members of the Committee for Students' Rights want the school to allow students to opt out. In an interview at a Starbucks near the campus, they said that they can learn about plagiarism directly from teachers and that there are other ways to catch cheaters. They also said fees paid to Turnitin would be better spent on other educational matters.

"McLean is a great school," said Nicholas Kaylor, 17, a senior. "They should have a little bit of trust in us."

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