General Information

Source: NBC Nightly News  
Resource Type: Video News Report  
Creator: Katie Couric  
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Event Date: 11/27/2001  
Air/Publish Date: 11/27/2001  
Copyright Date: 2001  
Clip Length 00:02:48

Description

Physics professor Louis Bloomfield discusses the plagiarism case at UVA involving 148 students whose papers are being investigated for plagiarism.

Keywords

Plagiarism, Cheating, University of Virginia, Internet, Honor System, Original Sources, Data Analysis, Consequences, Expelled, Charlottesville, Virginia, Physics

Citation

MLA
Plagiarism at the University of Virginia

KATIE COURIC, anchor:
The University of Virginia is famous for one of this country's oldest honor systems, but now it's at the center of a major cheating scandal. Eight students have recently left the school for plagiarizing physics papers and 140 more have been investigated. Physics Professor Louis Bloomfield discovered the tainted term papers while using a simple software program he wrote in his spare time. This morning, he joins us from UVA in Charlottesville, Virginia. Professor Bloomfield, good morning.

Tell me how this all unfolded.

Prof. LOUIS BLOOMFIELD: Well, for the past almost three years I've run a paperless course, all the homework is transacted via the Web, just mostly to make it easier for us to handle the papers so we can spend more time on the educational part rather than the bookkeeping part. And after this woman came to me and said that papers were being recycled, I was felt obligated to look and see whether that was the case.

COURIC: So you came up with this program on your own, which I think is so interesting, which would basically identify students who had plagiarized. How does it work and--and how did you come up with it?

Prof. BLOOMFIELD: Well, as--as a scientist, really, I've been trained for decades in--in how to analyze data, and here I had data, it's just not the usual stuff I deal with. The program simply picks up every possible pair of papers in my collection and looks through them exhaustively for matching phrases, the same words appearing in both papers simultaneously.

COURIC: So you found, much to your chagrin, professor, 148 students had, I guess, enough similarities in their papers to make you think that they either had shared papers or copied big chunks from other papers that have been submitted in the past, is that right?

Prof. BLOOMFIELD: That's right. I--something was clearly amiss; whether or not these students have plagiarized is something for the honor committee here to--to determine. But--and I should also say that of that 140-some students, half of them had the original paper and half of them, roughly, had papers that resembled those originals.
COURIC: So what you're saying is some of them might have written a paper that was then plagiarized. The question is did they willingly give that paper to another student.

Prof. BLOOMFIELD: That's exactly right. So--so, fortunately, most of these students really aren't guilty of an honor violation. It's a very small fraction, finally, of this huge number of students who have taken my course that are likely to be in real trouble.

COURIC: For an honor code violation at the university, there still is a single sanction and that is expulsion. Obviously, exceptions are made for sort of frivolous accusations. But in this case they must leave the university, correct?

Prof. BLOOMFIELD: Yes. And--and several have. So we're really at the beginning of--of all the honor trials themselves. And so far, most of the students who have come up to trial have been found guilty and--and asked--or told to leave the university forever.