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Understanding Risk Factors for Plagiarism Among MBA Students at a Northeastern US
Research University

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine 58 MBA students' perceptions and motivations for plagiarism to identify risk factors at a northeastern US research university (NERU). NERU MBA students engaged in plagiarism at rates which threatened program completion. Analyses revealed: (a) no difference in male and female plagiarism rates, (b) students viewed plagiarism as a bad practice and (c) grades, time and money were primary motivators. Twenty-one open codes were produced and grouped to depict students' progression through the program. Dualism, research and practical implications for the future were discussed.

Aim

The purpose of this explanatory sequential, mixed methods study was to examine MBA students' perceptions and motivations for plagiarism, as well as to determine if a significant difference between male and female plagiarism rates existed to identify plagiarism risk factors.

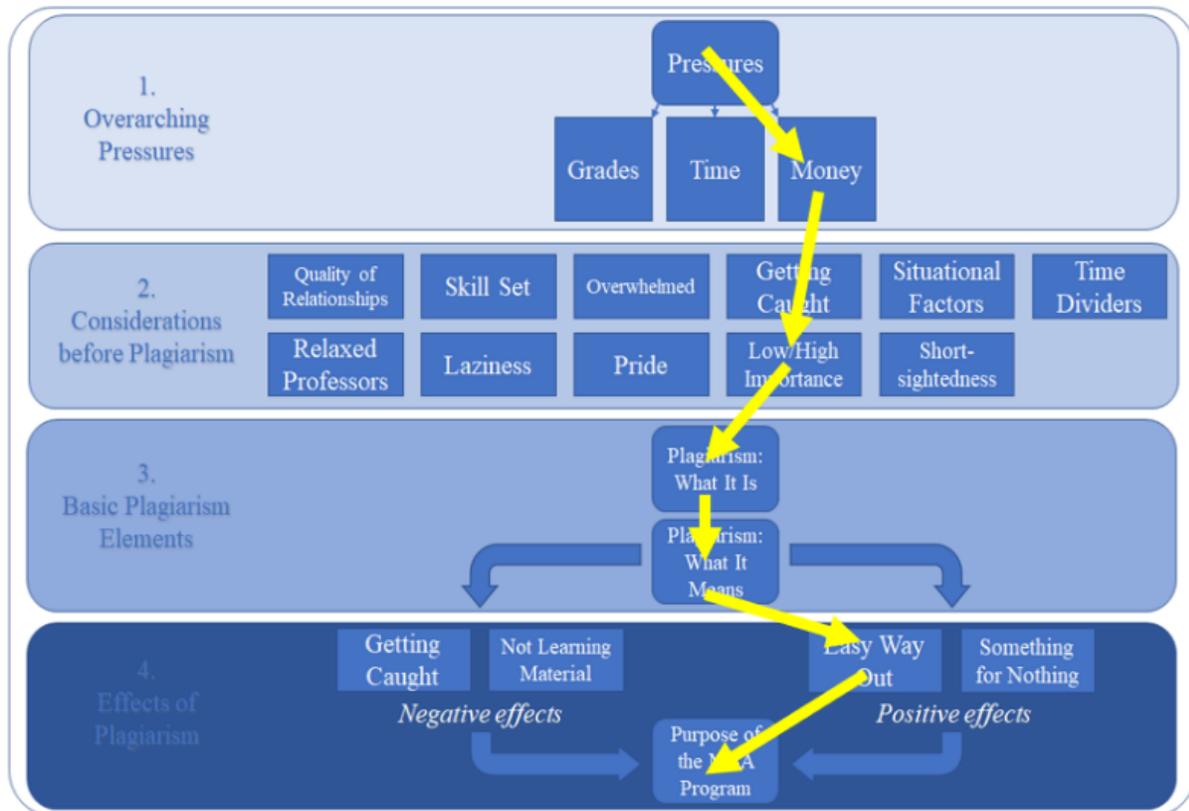
Problem

Over the past 20 years, academic dishonesty has grown with advances in technology (Zrnc & Lavbič, 2017) and in spite of traditional, administrative responses, like expulsion from school (Amua-Sekyi & Mensah, 2016). Literature on the topic of academic dishonesty informed that men engaged in such practices more than women (Jereb, Urh, Jerebic, & Šprajc, 2018). Plagiarism, which is a specific act of academic dishonesty (Solomon, 2018), negatively affected the graduation rates of NERU MBA students. In an attempt to gain an alternate perspective on plagiarism, this study sought insight from Yan and Harrington (2020) to apply risk factors, commonly understood within healthcare, to this academic problem.

Research Findings

The research questions were, (a) How do MBA students at NERU describe their perceptions of plagiarism?, (b) Is there a significant difference in the frequency of plagiarism cases between males and females at NERU?, and (c) How do MBA students at NERU describe their motivations for engaging in plagiarism? Universally, students regarded plagiarism as a bad practice that should be avoided. They recognized negative effects in addition to administrative responses, such as becoming an outcast among one's peers and the possible need to explain academic shortcomings to one's employer. Students additionally cited certain "benefits" to plagiarism, such as the ability to recapture one's time and reducing stress. Despite the negative administrative and additional consequences, students were willing to risk committing plagiarism. Furthermore, quantitative analyses revealed that no significant difference existed between men's and women's plagiarism scores.

Twenty-one open codes were produced and categorically grouped into an organizational chart. The arrows within the following figure represent one possible path through the MBA program.



Discussion

Students generally agreed that plagiarism involved acquiring a work, using that work within one's own work, but without proper citation of the acquired work's source. Such acts included copying and pasting information from a website or another student's paper. They were also concerned about failed grades, possible expulsion from school, and facing possible sanctions from their employers. Students risked these negative outcomes to alleviate stress and to recapture time for more desirable activities. Students spoke of simultaneous yet opposing ideas related to plagiarism. This sense of dualism was present when talking about an easier progression through the program versus expulsion from the program (The Double-Edged Sword) or quick rewards versus suffering the aftermath (The Present and the Future). *Being male* was not considered a risk factor for plagiarism because a significant difference was not found between the male and female groups, a finding inconsistent with the literature.

The 13 risk factors for plagiarism among MBA students at NERU were:

1. A deficiency of time
2. A high-grade orientation
3. A fear of losing money
4. Deficiencies in one's skill set
5. Laziness
6. Shortsightedness
7. High quality relationships
8. A desire to appear competent in front of one's peers

9. A perception of too much schoolwork
10. Relaxed professors
11. A desire for something for nothing
12. Ascribing low importance to schoolwork
13. A low concern of getting caught

Research Implications

The area of academic dishonesty is growing and will likely be ever-present within academia. Future research that investigates plagiarism, or academic dishonesty in general would benefit from adhering to the following directions:

1. Ensure equal representation of full- and part-time students because the factor of time could be viewed differently between the groups. Full-time NERU MBA students dedicate 100% of their time to school, are usually younger and more likely to be childless, whereas part-time students generally work full-time, are usually older and are more likely to have families.
2. Include finer levels of measurement to capture nuances reported in data collection. Such nuances could make any difference between male and female plagiarism scores more apparent and perhaps reveal a true difference.
3. Focus more on why students entered the program which would reveal the weight of the risk of plagiarizing.

These plagiarism risk factors have practical implications for the NERU MBA program:

1. Explanations to students about how coursework will help them in the future addresses risk factors 4, 6, and 12.
2. Removing irrelevant schoolwork addresses risk factors 9 and 12.
3. Providing citation examples to students addresses factors 4 and 10.
4. Encouragement towards academic integrity addresses factors 4, 6, 10 and 11.
5. Ensuring academic integrity education happens during orientation addresses factors 4 and 13.
6. University administrators who support professors when plagiarism is suspected addresses factor 13.

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