Academic Plagiarism: When It Involves Professors

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Abstract

There is no question that plagiarism is wrongdoing. When a professor uses a colleague's work without citing the source, it is effectively intellectual "theft". That person is taking property that does not belong to him/her! A professor who has been plagiarized will wonder whether to get him/herself into some kind of process to blow the whistle on one of his/her colleagues. When the work in question is published under the direction of a publisher, the process is simple and straightforward. This is not the case in the absence of such a third party. The route of the professor wishing to file a complaint is not clearly defined because he/she can turn to the accused professor's professional association, if he/she is a member, to his/her university or, as a last resort, to the courts. Regardless of the whistle-blowing process, the path is difficult, and the personal and social consequences, most often negative, are many for all parties involved. However, for the credibility of the entire scientific community, situations of plagiarism among professors must be brought to light and dealt with objectively.

Keywords: plagiarism; professional ethics; scientific misconduct; academic integrity; referencing

1. Introduction

There is no question: plagiarism is academic wrongdoing. The potential for plagiarism has always existed, although more recently there has been an upsurge of articles and communications about the subject (McKenna, 2022). Academic communications about plagiarism most often deal with situations involving students. Cheating during an exam or paying an "expert" to do the work requested are examples of that. In their regulations and policies, educational institutions have usually established a whistle-blowing process for this purpose.

Although it is conceivable that it is crucial to prevent and detect student plagiarism, it appears that plagiarism among professors is discussed less. Shashok (2011, pg. 303) states that, "Plagiarism and inadequate citing appear to have reached epidemic proportions in research publication." We must also recognize that communications about plagiarism among professors are particularly concerned with scientific research publications. However, there are many other forms of plagiarism in the academic world.

1.1 Definition of Plagiarism

Most dictionaries provide a fairly general and similar definition of plagiarism. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines plagiarism as: "The action or practice of taking someone else's work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one's own."[2] That definition can encompass a lot of things, and the word "etc." leaves it open to interpretation. Does it include expressions, concepts, the content of a lecture, PowerPoint presentations, or images? Definitely. Although it is self-evident to use the word "theft" when a physical asset is stolen from its owner, there seems to be some reluctance to saying the same in a plagiarism context. Nevertheless, it is intellectual "theft", just as unacceptable, and can result in serious negative consequences. Table 1 provides examples situations of plagiarism among fellow professors.

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[2] Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/. (January 17, 2024)

Table 1 Examples of plagiarism situations*

Plagiarism situations usually arise <u>when the reference to someone else's work is not provided</u>. Here are a few examples:

simple idea

- Hearing a colleague explain a research idea, keeping it, and then developing as if it were one's own.
- Using a methodology presented by a colleague, wrongly considering or thinking that it is an established practice that is part of the general common knowledge, and then presenting it in one's own work.
- Learning about a line of argumentation put forward by a colleague, distancing oneself from the subject for a while, then rewording the content in one's own style (paraphrasing).
- Starting with teaching notes, exams, or academic exercises created by colleagues in order to come up with similar ones.
- Reading a text written by a colleague in a foreign language, and then re-using the content in one's own language.
- Considering the work of a retired or deceased colleague as now belonging to everyone.
- Reproducing, as is, a text or table created by a colleague.

item as is

* Non-exhaustive sources: McKenna (2022), Geraldi (2021), Liles (2019), Suter and Suter (2018), Roig (2015), Shashok (2011), Nitterhouse (2003), and numerous academic documents.

Plagiarism is regularly defined in academic regulations and policies, especially in documents intended for students. In addition to the basic definition, similar to the one given above, they usually contain examples of plagiarism and advice to avoid being accused of plagiarism. The approach of a number of educational institutions involves – as much as possible – raising the awareness of, informing, and training students about providing appropriate referencing in any composition work. As suggested by McKenna (2022), if we want to deal with the issue of plagiarism, it's necessary to seriously look into its causal mechanisms, with a view to education and understanding. As the saying goes, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure".

When it comes to documents intended for researchers or internal policies for professors, we see that the word "plagiarism" is rarely mentioned in them as such. Instead, respect for intellectual property is usually called for, as follows: "Responsible research and writing implies that we respect the intellectual property rights of others: this is the essence of academic integrity."[3] After comparing the institutional policies of over 20 Canadian universities, Eaton (2017) found that the academic community uses a wide variety of definitions for plagiarism. As for Shashok (2011), that author identified a number of definitions for plagiarism from various authorities in research publications. The basis of those definitions is the same, similar to that of the Webster dictionary given above, in that it involves using another person's work without his/her permission, and especially, without citing him/her. The depth of explanations of the definitions identified varies, and some of them also refer to causes, symptoms, or consequences. As shown by the examples in Table 1, what the word "work" can encompass seems rather broad, ranging from appropriating a simple idea to reproducing the targeted items as is. The range of possibilities is broad, which suggests considering a number of factors when determining whether an instance of plagiarism exists (Jensen, 2012). In his publication, Geraldi (2021) explains the possibility, for a publisher of a scientific publication, of differentiating between major plagiarism and minor plagiarism, for example based on the number of words of the verbatism copying. Sometimes the existence of a plagiarism situation is clear. Authors of articles and volumes will fully understand that simply creating an expression, diagram or drawing can take time, with the creator having looked for just the right words to express his/her thought. In that situation, the author knows that what he/she is presenting is the fruit of his/her labour. When one of his/her colleagues reproduces the content without citing him/her, there is no doubt that it is plagiarism, at least in his/her opinion. However, the existence of an instance of plagiarism is not always clear.

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[3] York University, https://www.library.yorku.ca/web/research-learn/citing-your-work-academic-integrity/academic-integrity/ (January 17, 2024).

A number of researchers, including Geraldi (2021), agree that paraphrasing is one of the most difficult situations to detect and assess. It requires, among other things, good judgment in assessing the substance, form, and the content thus reproduced. In this regard, Roig (2015) provides a number of examples of appropriate and inappropriate paraphrasing, while also providing a few paraphrasing/plagiarism exercises. It's easy to understand that plagiarism of ideas is harder to detect – and prove – than plagiarism of text. We also add that, within a given disciplinary field, the knowledge base is similar. In accounting, for example, the accounting standards are the same for everyone. Therefore, it's in the way that they are taught, analyzed or incorporated into academic or scientific work that a university professor can differentiate him/herself. And, in some circumstances, that differentiating can be slight or subtle, thereby making identifying the plagiarism more difficult, even subjective. Multiple researchers also suspect that the definition of plagiarism may differ from one discipline to another (Jensen, 2012), may depend on the status of the person in question (Putra & al., 2023), or may vary from one culture to another (Couturier, 2021).

2. Unintentional or Willful Act

The processes for determining whether – or not – an act of plagiarism exists do not appear to distinguish between an unintentional act and a willful act. This is a bit surprising since one could agree that an "oversight" or "lack of knowledge" is a less serious fault than a willful act of appropriating something that doesn't belong to us. The work of Childers and Bruton (2015) demonstrates that students readily understand that "copying/pasting" without citing the source is plagiarism, but they are less comfortable when it comes to plagiarism of ideas. This may explain why people seem to better understand the possibility that student plagiarism can be an unintentional act, and why so many educational institutions develop preventive training tools on the subject. As shown in Table 1, plagiarism exists in various forms, some of which can be more complex to detect.

Although the intent behind the act can make a difference in other contexts, in criminal proceedings for example, the academic world seems to feel that any form of plagiarism by a professor, whatever it is, is unacceptable. According to Shashok (2011), for most stakeholders, such as publishers, the reasons why material is reproduced without a citation don't change the fact that it is plagiarism. For a research professor, plagiarism is still plagiarism! So, the seriousness of the wrongdoing doesn't seem to be factored in, which leaves slight room for error, if it indeed exists. However, a university professor is a human being who can err, by forgetting to properly cite one of his/her sources. But given his/her academic profile, it will still be difficult for him/her to plead ignorance. Being dedicated to the advancement of knowledge, professors are expected to engage in behaviour toward each other that is as exemplary as possible. As Suter and Suter (2018) mentioned, it should be remembered that writing or creating is learning along the road to expertise.

Table 2 presents the best-known ways to avoid being accused of plagiarism. As mentioned by Cooper (2016, pg. 1), it is "… steps you take to avoid it ought not to be based on your memory alone."

Table 2 Examples of ways to avoid plagiarizing or being accused of plagiarism

In addition to being sure to <u>provide the reference to any aspect "borrowed" from a colleague's work</u>, in quotation marks when the exact words are reproduced, it is necessary to, for example:

- Conscientiously conduct a literature review of the subject studied.
- Systematically note the source of each aspect used.
- Be sure to properly render the meaning of the ideas, concepts, models, methodology, etc. studied.
- Prepare the References section as the work progresses.
- Indicate "source unknown" or "anonymous" for any unreferenced aspect found on the web (or elsewhere).
- Provide a notice at the beginning of the document inviting the reader to contact the author in the event of an error or omission in the referencing provided.
- Use plagiarism detection software before publishing any text at all.

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* Non-exhaustive sources: Geraldi (2021), Suter and Suter (2018), Cooper (2016), Roig (2015), Shashok (2011), as well as numerous academic documents.

The content of Table 2 provides an opportunity to illustrate how difficult it can be to identify a plagiarism situation. The author of this paper first took on the task of listing various pieces of advice for preventing plagiarism. The outcome of that questioning essentially appears in the table above. One can easily agree that these are simple, logical "common-sense" ideas. However, it's not impossible that the author of this article has seen a similar list in the past, but doesn't remember where or when. When he/she became aware of it, if applicable, the professor may not have known that he/she would write about it one day. His/her mind had simply stored the information to reproduce it later. In fact, a number of documents from various sources present means of action similar to Table 2 (see *), in varying levels of detail. Coming to a conclusion about the intent to mislead or deceive the reader requires good judgment because it's not always "black or white". Given the serious consequences of blowing the whistle on plagiarism, one could consider qualifying the extent of it.

It must be recognized that some professors sometimes plagiarize their colleagues knowing full well that they are doing so. Obviously, a university professor is expected to know how to properly cite the work of others: research methodology 101! Since little has been written about plagiarism among professors, and even less about planned plagiarism, one can only dither about the motivations for such behaviour. It is easy to understand the need for a member of the academic community to provide sustained performance, which includes obtaining publication credits. Scientific research involves creating, probing, and investigation in order to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. There is no doubt that the pressure exerted by the task can be intense at times, and more so for some people. Nitterhouse (2003) suggests as well that time pressure is one of the causes of plagiarism by employee or students. A professor's work is not routine; it requires talent, motivation and creativity. The desire to build a reputation, look good during the annual evaluation, or win a prize can explain the inhibition of certain moral values. The potential of obtaining quick results with less effort can also contribute to that. One might believe that a professor who deliberately commits the act of plagiarizing thinks that no one will realize it, or worse, that it isn't gross negligence.

3. Blowing the Whistle on Plagiarism

As mentioned above, the discussion of plagiarism among professors is essentially about publications in specialized research journals. In that type of situation, a professor who has been plagiarized can explain the situation right to the journal's publisher. Since a number of publishers have a zero-tolerance policy, regardless of the fault committed, the faulty publication in question will likely be withdrawn. As such, the complaining professor fairly quickly reclaims the authorship that is rightfully his/her. However, there are many other forms of plagiarism, especially from an academic perspective. A professor may, for example, draw heavily on the teaching notes prepared and issued to students by part-time lecturer or a hired intern. Or a file to track learning created by a professor could undergo slight vocabulary changes and then be presented as an educational innovation at a conference. In both of these situations, it would be plagiarism IF the reference to the colleague's work is not properly presented. The specifics of this type of plagiarism are that there is no direct involvement of a third party, like the editor of a scientific journal or of a publishing house. Therefore, a professor who has been plagiarized in this way will wonder who to turn to in order to make his/her work known, if he/she wishes to report the plagiarism. We will return to the whistle-blowing processes a little later.

When faced with student plagiarism, many professors will wonder whether to report the situation or let it go. They know that it is academic wrongdoing, but report it? Even though the whistle-blowing process is currently in place in most educational institutions, a number of them will say that it isn't an easy exercise. The professor must gather his/her evidence – which he/she may have failed to do at the beginning of the case – and defend his/her point of view before the appointed University Disciplinary Committee. The burden of proof, like in the current judicial system, appears to lie with the complainant. Also, the professor will likely have to face the student in question, as well as the people around the latter, in his/her own classroom and environment! Students will often plead ignorance, claim that the instructions in the syllabus weren't clear enough or, according to Couturier (2021), say that nobody told them not to! It's not easy to "prove beyond a reasonable doubt" that an instance of student plagiarism exists. When faced with the disadvantages to be incurred, multiple professors will simply choose to "turn a blind eye". When carrying out his study on the emotional experience of a professor having to resolve a situation of student plagiarism in the Chinese context, Wang (2023, pg. 14) mentions that "The findings of this research have proven that Chinese teachers of English experience various types of emotional challenges in their interactions with ecological systems when addressing student plagiarism in the context of academic writing." It is easy to understand that the experience is emotionally difficult. Professors, for whom training is central to their professional life, can have difficulty even observing or seeing a situation of academic misconduct. Understandably, it is easy to understand how difficult it can be to blow the whistle on plagiarism among professors.

Here, we are talking about colleagues from the same field who may work at the same university or be part of the same research group. In addition, one might think that a PhD student or a young professor would be less inclined to file a complaint of plagiarism, especially if the person who committed the wrongdoing has a certain reputation. In their column, Bartlett and Smallwood (2004, pg. 1) mention that "Very few of them will ever be dragged into the sunlight. That's because academe often discourages victims from seeking justice, and when they do, tends to ignore their complaints -- a kind of scholarly "don't ask, don't tell" policy." Plagiarism among professors exists, but it seems that few situations are openly or publicly reported. Recall, however, that simply adding a bibliographic reference, a firmly established practice in the academic world, usually makes it possible to prevent this type of situation. A professor who has been plagiarized will have to show that he/she is the author or creator of the aspects in question. In order to raise professors' awareness about "protecting" their work, Table 3 presents a few ways to ensure a minimum of support or supporting documents when it comes to "proving" the existence of plagiarism. Of course, this doesn't mean that a professor who has been plagiarized will be heard or believed, but he/she will be able to have a minimum of information in support of his/her complaint.

Table 3 Examples of methods for avoiding being plagiarized without minimal recourse*

In addition to what is mentioned in Table 2, professors and researchers can put "safeguards" in place enabling them to authenticate their work. Here are a few examples:

- Don't share one's ideas until they are in an "official" format.
- Describe one's projects in a general way, when necessary to do so (e.g., approval of the academic task), before they are sufficiently advanced.
- Share ideas, concepts and creations with trusted people when necessary.
- Announce the obtaining of a research grant, the acceptance of a conference proposal, etc. when the new is accredited.
- Keep a paper trail (e.g., emails) of exchanges with colleagues, or with publishers of scientific journals, in chronological order.
- Draw attention via an intellectual property statement such as "All rights reserved" or "Reproduction in any form is prohibited without the written permission of the author."
- Publicize, via a website, social network, or university portal, the list of work carried out, along with a brief description.

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* This table was built from Cooper (2016), Koper (2013), as well as the author's personal experience with reporting plagiarism.

4. Whistle-Blowing Process

The possibility of going right to the publisher of scientific or academic journals to make plagiarism known is possibly the first action that a plagiarized professor will take. In the absence of that particular context, let's now look at what remedies are available. First of all, we would mention that it is quite possible for a university professor of accounting to also be a member of a professional association like the International Certified Professional Accountants (AICPA) or the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) in the United States. One of the roles of these associations is to set performance standards for their members in carrying out their duties via a Code of Conduct. That Code sets out the broad principles of professional conduct, which include The Public Interest, due care and integrity. Without explicitly referring to plagiarism situations, the Code sets out the basic core values in carrying out the professional duties. Thus, "A *member* shall not commit an act discreditable to the profession." (AICPA, Code of professional Conduct, 3.400.001). In the interest of protecting the public, the AICPA also mentions that "Members who notice, suspect or are aware of significant deficiencies in the work of another member should seriously consider referring the matter to the Professional Ethics Division."[4]

In other words, a professor accountant who is a member of a professional association could file a complaint of plagiarism with that organization, provided that the professor accused of plagiarism is also part of it. We note, however, that it is usually appropriate for the "aggrieved" member to first contact the other party directly to enable him/her to rectify the situation. Even though the discussion above pertains to the accounting profession, note that there are many other professional associations, such as for lawyers, doctors and engineers. Their role, functioning, and commitment to the public are relatively similar. Therefore, multiple university professors are part of both the university community and a professional association.

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[4]https://us.aicpa.org/forthepublic/disciplinaryactions.html (January 17, 2024)

At present, there doesn't seem to have been any complaints about plagiarism among professors analyzed by a professional accounting Disciplinary Committee. On one hand, it can be assumed that such a committee may have difficulty assessing the existence of an instance of plagiarism, through a lack of expertise in that field in which a minority of its members works. On the other hand, in the presence of another remedy, either academic or even legal, the Disciplinary Committee is usually in the habit of waiting for the verdict of those other bodies before making a decision.

A professor wishing to file a formal complaint for plagiarism within his/her educational institution will not necessarily know how to proceed. It's the lack of a formal reporting process in most universities that makes it more difficult. A professor who has been plagiarized may not know which administrative level to contact: his/her department or faculty, the office of the dean of research, or a research ethics board? He/she might even have been told to keep quiet, for the "good" of his/her academic community. Reporting a plagiarism situation is a serious decision that could have consequences on the careers and lives of multiple people. Recall, however, as mentioned by Botha (2022, pg. 1), "Be it intentional or unintentional, plagiarism remains an academic crime." After receiving a formally filed plagiarism complaint, the university's management will likely form an Advisory or Disciplinary Committee. Let's say that the first reflex could be to turn only to internal people, so as to resolve the situation in private. A situation of plagiarism among university professors, whether proven or not, can tarnish the image of excellence that the university wants to put forward. After analyzing a plagiarism situation involving three university rectors in Indonesia, Putra & al. (2023) find that plagiarism situations can be politicized. In other words, power relationships could influence the outcome of the analysis. In the context of student plagiarism, Liles (2019), echoing Devlin (2003), mentions that universities are reluctant to publicly disclose the annual number of plagiarism situations, so as not to damage their reputation. Therefore, it is a short step to concluding that the negative impact from public disclosure of plagiarism among professors is likely more feared.

Needless to say, the objectivity of the members of the Committee responsible for analyzing a plagiarism situation is crucial, which could be more difficult to achieve when no external consultants are invited to it. Some stakeholders may want to hide or downplay the plagiarism situation. In addition, it seems important for the people who know the "plagiarized" subject well to be involved in the process. Jensen (2012, pg. 4) mentions that "…makes it difficult to bring in people from other disciplines to determine if plagiarism has occurred – they do not have an appropriate reference." There is no doubt that it is professors of accounting, for example, who would be in the best position to "assess" the innovative nature of an educational tool specific to their field. However, the people around the professors involved in matter may take sides for personal or academic reasons. Without a clearly established process, the analysis of a plagiarism complaint may not result in a fair conclusion. It's probably as a last resort that a professor who has been plagiarized would turn to the courts to make his/her point known. We should mention right off the bat that it would be a lengthy and expensive route, highly unusual for a professor. It can be understood, for example, that a company holding a patent of invention for one of its products would sue a competitor that manufactured a similar product. Significant amounts of money can be at stake, which isn't usually the case in academic plagiarism. Basically, what a professor wants is intellectual recognition of his/her work, which has likely been denied to him/her by the other party since the matter is before the courts. Jensen (2012) looked at the legal implications of plagiarism. He raises the fact that plagiarism itself is not defined in the Act, which means that it's the concept of "Copyright" that serves as the basis for a future judgment. However, even though a university professor can invent or create, he/she will rarely file a patent application or officially register copyright in order to assert his/her right of ownership. So, there's a significant difference between the academic aspect and the legal aspect. Thus, that could lead to a finding of the existence of plagiarism, under the general, professional or academic definitions, while a court would dismiss the complainant's application under the Act. Table 4 summarizes the various remedies involving plagiarism.

Table 4 Various remedies for reporting plagiarism
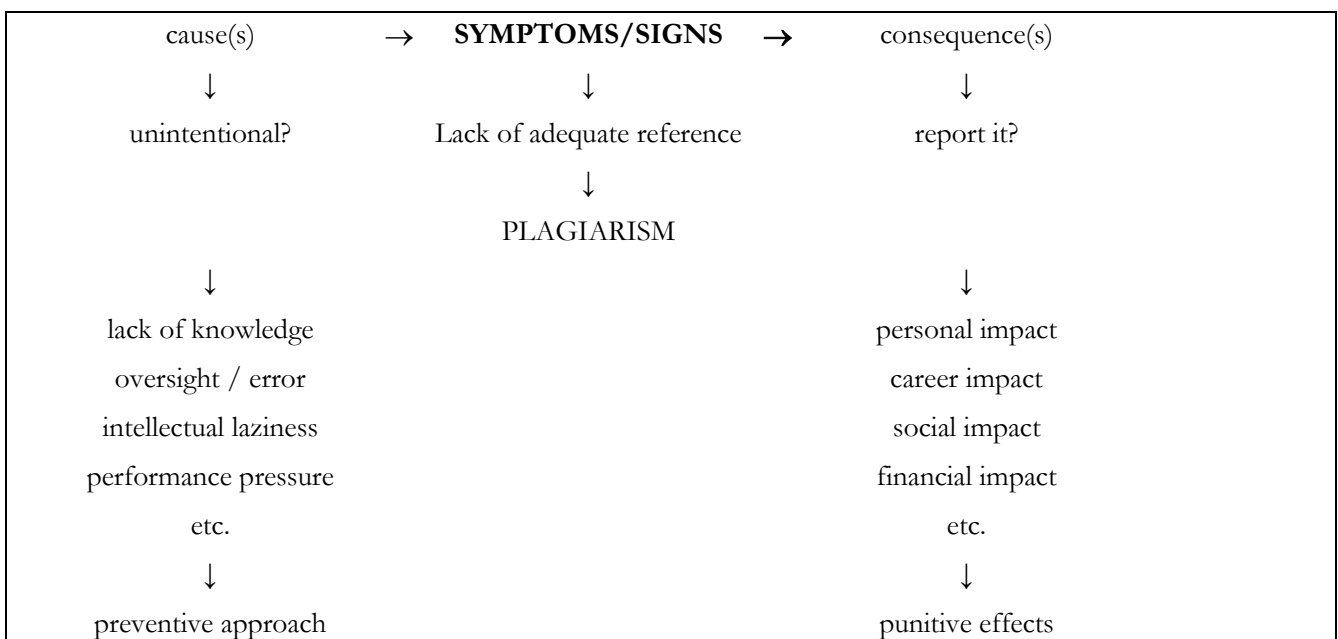
professional remedy	academic remedy	legal remedy
↓	↓	↓
protection of public	academic policies	Act: Copyright
due care & integrity	ethics and moral	exclusive right of ownership

5. Consequences of Plagiarism

There are definitely consequences with plagiarism, whether it is reported or not. A professor who has been plagiarized will likely go through a range of emotions, such as denial, anger, aggression, resentment, pain and bitterness, to name a few. No need for a scientific reference to understand that. Moreover, seeing one's work presented by someone else as if it were his/her own naturally impacts any academic career. In the academic world, publishing and being cited by other publications are part of what gives value to a professional portfolio. A professor who has been plagiarized, whether or not he/she decides to report the situation, bears the situation within him/herself. He/she may be less motivated by work, go through a period of psychological distress, or distance him/herself from university life. He/she may even operate in the same academic circles as the one who plagiarized him/her, which complicates the situation. A professor who blows the whistle on plagiarism will have to make his/her point known, which will require energy, which can be emotionally draining (Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004). He/she also risks being ostracized for bringing the situation to light, even though he/she is actually the injured party. He/she has exposed the situation, which some will criticize him/her for! As for the professor accused of plagiarism, it can be said that many will try to defend and justify themselves, even going so far as to trivialize the situation or downplay the contribution of the complainant's work. As Putra & al. (2023) mention, serious discussions can arise between the accuser and the accused. Wang (2023) mentioned that reporting student plagiarism is a difficult situation to go through. His article even mentions that it could affect the teaching quality of the professor who filed a complaint. It's easy to understand that this is likely to be worse when it involves plagiarism among colleagues guided by research ethics policies and protocols. In academia, plagiarism is gross negligence, one of the worst breaches of the codes of conduct that a professor can commit.

A professor "suspected" of plagiarizing will obviously feel the consequences of the plagiarism accusation. As such, it's easy to understand that a mere rumor can seriously impact the reputation and then hinder the advancement of a professor's career. Therefore, he/she risks being ostracized for committing the act of plagiarism. As mentioned by Suter and Suter (2018, pg. 151), "The charge of plagiarism can blindside authors and ruin careers." Even if the accusation of plagiarism is unfounded, the after-effects could remain as many will say to themselves "There is no smoke without fire." However, let's say that all this occurs if the reporting, as well as the decision of the Plagiarism Advisory or Disciplinary Committee, is publicly disclosed. When the situation is handled internally, in private, the consequences are mitigated, sometimes even eliminated. So, care is called for when it comes to plagiarism because the consequences on the lives of the people involved are considerable, on a personal, professional, social and sometimes financial level. Naturally, in addition to the parties directly involved, the consequences can also be unfavorable for the academic department as well as for the university as a whole. Table 5 presents a schematic diagram of the various elements discussed in this publication.

Table 5 Plagiarism as a drawing

cause(s)	$\rightarrow$	**SYMPTOMS/SIGNS**	$\rightarrow$	consequence(s)
$\downarrow$		$\downarrow$		$\downarrow$
unintentional?		Lack of adequate reference		report it?
		$\downarrow$		
		PLAGIARISM		
$\downarrow$				$\downarrow$
lack of knowledge				personal impact
oversight / error				career impact
intellectual laziness				social impact
performance pressure				financial impact
etc.				etc.
$\downarrow$				$\downarrow$
preventive approach				punitive effects

Source: The author of this article, who specializes in teaching multidisciplinary accounting cases, regularly uses the basic cause(s)/symptom(s)/consequence(s) relationship to illustrate how to go beyond what is strictly obvious (signs) in analyzing a case (Deslauriers, 2019, pg. 17). Thus, it could be considered that observing clues of plagiarism would be only the obvious part of the story.

6. Conclusion

Plagiarism among professors, its motivations and consequences, is a less-discussed topic than student plagiarism. The academic process of whistle-blowing is less accessible, and legal action is essentially inappropriate. There is no doubt that better guidance would help prevent a plagiarism situation from worsening over time, to the detriment of the parties involved. Remember: an accusation of plagiarism can easily be prevented simply through proper referencing! The purpose of this article was to raise awareness within the scientific community about the existence of various forms of plagiarism among fellow professors. Plagiarism is unquestionably gross academic negligence. Keeping quiet due to lack of time, out of "fear" of damaging one's career, or because it preserves the institution's image doesn't resolve the situation. Therefore, it seems important for plagiarism to be reported, in an objective analysis process, so that it can be stopped. The credibility of the entire scientific community is at stake.

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