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Plagiarism Among Applicants for Faculty Positions

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LETTERS

Plagiarism Among Applicants for Faculty Positions

To the Editor. Recently, Dr. DiPiro published an article in the *Journal*¹ that discussed several aspects pertinent to the process of faculty recruitment, emphasizing an individual's "fit" within the culture of the hiring institution. In the present article, we discuss another aspect of "fitness" that became evident to our search committee during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Our search committee was established in May 2010 to hire a tenure-track faculty member at the level of assistant/associate professor in the department of pharmaceutical sciences. The committee consisted of faculty members in the departments of pharmaceutical sciences and pharmacy practice. Throughout the year, the search committee met 4 times and discussed 48 applicants. The committee members recommended several applicants to the department chair for screening calls and interviewed 2 candidates on site. During a review of applications, the search committee members discovered that several applicants submitted teaching philosophies that contained text that could be found verbatim elsewhere. Specifically, portions of these documents had been copied from online sources and pasted into the application. Obviously, our enthusiasm for these and other candidates with similar issues was significantly diminished and their applications were not pursued further.

Plagiarism is defined as "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own, to use (another's production) without crediting the source, to commit literary theft, or to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source."² Unfortunately, plagiarism is far too common. "Turnitin" reported 110 million instances of matched content found in 40 million papers submitted by students during a 10-month period.³ However, this problem is not limited to students. The occurrence of plagiarism in the scientific literature has been well documented.^{4,5} In fact, several publishers have implemented software programs to detect plagiarism in manuscripts submitted to their journals.⁵ Additionally, peer-reviewers for journals have been encouraged to be vigilant in searching for any matched content.⁶

Plagiarism in application materials is also not a new concept.⁷ Segal and colleagues reported plagiarism in medical residency application essays.⁸ In fact, this group found an evidence of plagiarism in more than 10% of essays submitted for a residency program at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. Although the rate of occurrence was higher among international students, plagiarism was observed in the application of US citizen as well.

Surprisingly, students with academic honors were among those applicants with plagiarized application essays. A 2007 report in the journal *Family Medicine* also cites examples of plagiarism among applicants for medical fellowships, hypothesizing that the increased availability of content on the Web has led to a decreased awareness of the issue of plagiarism.⁹ The easy availability of technology may make plagiarism easier to commit, but it can also make it easier to detect.^{5,10} For instance, with some of our applicants, plagiarism was detected using a simple Google search.

Faculty members are considered role models for students; their conduct has the potential to affect the reputation of the academic institution involved. As such, it is essential to check all application materials submitted by faculty applicants for any evidence of plagiarism. Faculty members have a responsibility to train students not only in their content areas, but also in areas such as research ethics. Additionally, because graduate students and post-doctoral trainees are the main group of applicants who apply for junior faculty positions, it would be helpful to educate graduate students and trainees about the negative impact of plagiarism on the educational system.¹⁰

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