

Plagiarism as an Ethical Dilemma at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

MSG Patrick Cartledge

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class M13

SGM Glenn Caspari

December 14, 2006

ABSTRACT

Plagiarism at any academic institution is illegal. At the United States Army Sergeants Majors Academy it is also an unethical act which violates the schools honor code. I realize that everyone who commits plagiarism is not aware they are breaking the rules. These are the individuals who just need to be educated on the rules regarding the standards of writing. The problem for me arises from those students who know the rules and deliberately choose to disobey. These Sergeants Majors are the ones who are teetering on that ethical line, and these are the Soldiers whom I discuss in my paper.

We, the Sergeants Majors of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy were given the task of writing a paper on an ethical dilemma within the United States Army. The task was given approximately 2 months ago. I put the assignment off for as long as I could. When I finally sat before my computer to write the paper, I could not come up with a topic which peaked my interest or made my juices flow.

I went on line to the google web site and typed in "Ethical dilemmas within the United States Army". My screen became inundated with topics ranging from unethical recruiting violations, gays in the military, all the way to the ethics of killing insurgents in Iraq. I browsed the sight for a while and still could not find a desirable topic for which to write my paper. I read numerous sites pertaining to ethics. I searched for an article to assist me in writing my paper. Then I thought, am I looking for an article to help me do my paper or am I looking to copy someone else work and stick my name on it? It really would not be difficult. I could copy, cut, and paste and be finished in no time flat. There were certainly enough articles. I was more than positive that no one would take the time to check.

Then it hit me, if it is this easy for me to plagiarize my paper, how many students in the academy actually go through with it How many of my fellow Sergeants Majors have succumb to the temptation of plagiarism?

I then decided to go on line and discover the true meaning of plagiarism. To my surprise there were enough definitions of the word to keep me busy reading for some time. I did find one which I thought suited my purpose well.

“Plagiarism is an academic malpractice. Plagiarism is the use of ideas, words, or findings of others without acknowledging them as such. To plagiarize is to give the impression that the student has written thought or discovered something that he or she has in fact borrowed from someone else without acknowledging this in an appropriate manner.”

By this definition, I can have a thought that could be considered plagiarism. Since I have been at the academy, I have written numerous papers. I have also had to give briefings on a mired of topics. For each of these assignments I went on the internet to get help. So I thought to myself, did I commit plagiarism? By the definition I listed earlier, there is a good chance that I did commit the offense.

We have all been informed that plagiarism is not permissible within this institution or any other NCOES. I honestly don't believe that I willingly committed an infraction of the rules, but there are 649 students in Class 57. Who can say that everyone in this class can make the same statement? I know for a fact that with all of the information on the web, plagiarism can be made into an art form.

It is very easy to see how this can pose an ethical dilemma on several fronts. First of all, the Army is built on the Army Values; Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Self-less Service,

Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. The United States Army Sergeants Majors Academy operates on an honor code. The code reads:

Integrity is an accepted basic attribute of all military personnel. Your word and signature is your bond. We consider the product of an individual or student group, be it written or oral, to be the work of the presenter unless otherwise specifically shown. The use of other student's work, plagiarism, and the unauthorized use of copy write material is cause for removal from the academy. The academy does not tolerate lying, cheating or stealing. We trust a student's word or signature as truth until he or she violates that trust.

The wording of the academy's honor code specifically starts with the word integrity. It also addresses what is considered plagiarism while a student at USASMA, and what are the penalties for the offense. We at the academy have all agreed to these terms in order to attend. I must now ask the question. Do students at USASMA plagiarize any of their work, and if so why would they risk their careers by doing so? The following reason for most plagiarism was written by Mano Singham for the Web Journal.

“Most often . . . the plagiarist has started out with good intentions but hasn't left enough time to do the reading and thinking that the assignment requires, has become desperate, and just wants the whole thing done with. At this point, in one common scenario, the student gets careless while taking notes on a source or incorporating notes into a draft, so the source's words and ideas blur into those of the student.”

One could read this definition and understand why a USASMA student would be tempted to commit plagiarism. A Soldier is inundated with numerous briefings and papers from the academy, along with whatever work they receive from their college classes. The student receives an assignment far enough in advance for completion. They procrastinate and before they realize it, the time has arrived to turn in the work. He or she has not done the appropriate research, and thus the desperation sets in.

I am not saying that I agree with this scenario, but I can understand how the Soldier gets to this point. I truly believe that a person can rationalize any act to fit his or her situation. It is easy for someone to say, "that's the same thing that I was going to write, so it's no big deal", or "know ones going to know", or worst yet, "know ones going to care".

The use of another person's work is not new, nor is it illegal. There are rules in the academia world which allow for this. A student just has to take the time to give the proper credit to the appropriate authors.

If a student is aware of what plagiarism is, and what the proper procedure is for avoiding it, there can be only one reason to cross that ethical line. The individual has decided to pick and choose which of the Army values they wish to abide by. The question then becomes, are these the individuals we want leading our Soldiers? The Army values have become the bedrock of our service, and they are drilled into us from the day we enter the Army. A Sergeant Major attending this academy should be upholding the values and not blatantly breaking them.

An outsider reading this paper must think that plagiarism is running rampant at USASMA. I honestly don't believe this to be the case. I believe that the vast majority of USASMA students take pride in the academy, and would not purposely do anything to dishonor it. But I am not naïve enough to believe that everyone fits into that category. I have been fortunate enough or should I say unfortunate enough to over hear student conversations regarding this topic. I have come to the conclusion that the ethical line of plagiarism is seriously being teetered upon.

