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Student Plagiarism, Faculty Responsibility

A review by two Ohio University officials has found “rampant and flagrant plagiarism” by graduate students in the institution’s mechanical engineering department — and concluded that three faculty members either “failed to monitor” their advisees’ writing or “basically supported academic fraudulence” by ignoring the dishonesty. [The report](#) by the two-person review team called for the dismissal of two professors, and university officials said they would bring in a national expert on plagiarism to advise them.

Wednesday’s announcement by the university was the latest development in an unfolding inquiry that was prompted by a [one-man campaign](#) by Thomas Matrka, a former engineering graduate student who complained that his plagiarism accusations against fellow students went largely unacted on for months.

One investigation by the engineering college’s [academic honesty committee, released in March](#), found widespread plagiarism by graduate students but did not place any blame on professors, which Matrka said ignored a central part of the problem.

The same cannot be said of the review that was released Wednesday, which was conducted by Gary D. Meyer, an assistant vice president for economic development and technology development, and H. Hugh L. Bloemer, associate professor emeritus of geography and a former Faculty Senate chair.

Their four-month investigation did not absolve the students, noting that “all members of the academic community, students and faculty alike, are responsible for the integrity and originality of their work.” But they reserved their harshest words — and there were plenty — for the students’ advisers. They noted that of the 55 graduate theses in which students had plagiarized their own work or others’, the vast majority were overseen by three faculty members, who “either failed to monitor the writing in their advisees’ theses or simply ignored academic honesty, integrity and basically supported academic fraudulence. We consider this most serious.”

Meyer and Bloemer added: “We are appalled that three members of the faculty in mechanical engineering have so blatantly chosen to ignore their responsibilities by contributing to an atmosphere of negligence toward issues of academic misconduct in their own department. We are amazed to see that the internal ad hoc committee recommended no reprimand for those individuals.”

The review called for the dismissal of two of the professors, including the mechanical engineering department’s chairman, and to bar the third professor from overseeing theses for two years. (The investigators said the engineering dean should speak with the four other professors who oversaw at least one of the plagiarized master’s theses about what the report called their “oversights” — the quotation marks were the reviewers.)

Although they directed most of their consternation at the professors, Meyer and Bloemer did not call for letting the plagiarists themselves off easily. They recommended that all plagiarized theses be removed from the library,

and while the engineering college committee suggested that all of the plagiarists be given the chance to “correct” their theses, Meyer and Bloemer said the former students should be forced to defend their theses again and to reenroll for at least one credit hour during that time — paid for by the mechanical engineering department.

The reviewers noted that seven of the master’s students whose work they identified as plagiarized had gone on to get Ph.D.’s from the university, and that three others were current doctoral students there. The latter should be suspended until their master’s theses have passed muster, Meyer and Bloemer said.

In addition to releasing the latest report, Ohio administrators [also announced](#) that [Gary Pavela](#), the director of judicial programs and student ethical development at the University of Maryland and a leading expert on academic integrity, would advise the university on how to proceed with its investigation and its future policies on plagiarism, both to ensure fair treatment for the subjects of its investigations and to help it put in place policies to stop such problems in the future.

“Academic integrity has to be the core of the institution, and everything we do has to be grounded in that principle,” said Kathy Krendl, the university’s provost. “We are investigating the situation thoroughly and diligently, arranging internal reviews, and bringing in a national expert. These are valuable steps in bringing this process to closure.”

Matrka, the former graduate student whose own spade work brought the plagiarism to the university’s attention, said in an interview Wednesday that he felt satisfaction that nearly two years after he first brought his accusations to Ohio officials, university administrators were “actually owning up to the full extent of the problem,” including the faculty role. “There was a lot of reluctance and denial” about the involvement of professors, Matrka said. “You have to admire Meyer and Bloemer for doing the right thing.”

Krendl said she did not share Matrka’s view that the university had been slow to act. “I think we’ve acted appropriately, deliberately and carefully,” she said. “I think it’s a serious issue that we need to continue to pursue, fairly and following the principle of due process. But understand: There will be sanctions.”

— [Doug Lederman](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/06/01/plagiarism>.*

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