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## Turnitin: Friend, not foe

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# TURNITIN: FRIEND, NOT FOE

by Marianne Buehler

illustration by Caitlin Yarsky

One of the cornerstones of academia is creative expression. In some of our written expressions, there is a need to provide appropriate attribution if we are using part of someone else's materials by quoting or paraphrasing his or her work. In some instances, we also need to cite our own previously distributed or published materials. Because the academic environment encourages and requires the use of articles, books and web-sites for course assignments and projects, it is imperative that students have an understanding of how and when to give credit to an original author. If students do not give attribution to their information sources, plagiarism has taken place. Plagiarism is using another person's ideas or creative work without giving credit to that person.

RIT students come from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds. In my experience, students are conversant at various levels in their citation skills. Some cultures have different expectations when using other people's scholarship. Faculty who are teaching classes where there are written assignments are faced with students with various citing skill levels. To assist faculty and students, the RIT Libraries subscribe to a plagiarism-detection service named Turnitin (since 2000) that matches instances of missing attribution and a lack of paraphrasing and necessary quotation marks. For those of you who have never used Turnitin, here is a brief overview of the process: A student uploads his or her paper to Turnitin using a class login. The

paper is digitized as an algorithmic fingerprint and is circulated via web bots over the Internet and, in some instances, into databases such as Proquest.

The fingerprint is matched with any materials it finds in the online environment, and a report is generated that shows any instances of possible plagiarism. By clicking on the colored URLs or text within the report, faculty or students can easily see where the original text came from and how it compares to the text used in the student paper. When an instructor and a student sit down together to review a paper, the visual Tur-

nitin report provides a powerful and beneficial learning experience by indicating exactly where the problems are and why they occurred. The digitized fingerprint of the paper remains in the Turnitin database and cannot be reengineered back into a coherent text. Turnitin's database also checks incoming papers—a protection for authors who have previously submitted their original papers. All authors of all papers retain their copyrights. As an interesting note, some faculty use Turnitin before submitting their scholarship to journals, book publishers, or for conference proceedings to ensure that they have not plagiarized. Turnitin promotes and values

academic integrity and complies with all relevant intellectual property laws.

In *Reporter's* February 23, 2007 issue (page 7), Brian Adeloye criticizes the use of Turnitin at RIT. During a phone conversation with Brian on February 14, 2007 concerning various aspects of Turnitin, he stated that he has never used the tool. To have a valid opinion about Turnitin's academic value, I believe that it is important to use the tool to understand where its value (or not) may lie. RIT faculty use of Turnitin is one of the most reliable and swiftest ways to evaluate student work and to prevent awarding fraudulent grades, a fair practice for ALL students. RIT faculty have an obligation to ensure that students are honestly creating their own work by correctly using others' scholarship. \*

