

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

May 14, 2007

MEMORANDUM

To: Deans, Directors, Chairs

From: Douglas Estry, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education
David Gift, Vice Provost, Libraries Computing and Technology
Karen Klomprens, Associate Provost for Graduate Education
Dugald McMillan, Acting University Registrar
Linda O. Stanford, Associate Provost for Academic Services

Subject: Turnitin

This memorandum should be shared with all faculty, teaching assistants, instructors, and all individuals involved with teaching undergraduate and graduate students.

Recently, at Michigan State, discussions have occurred regarding Turnitin – an online anti-plagiarism tool for colleges and high schools.

We strongly recommend that any decision to use Turnitin be coupled with a close reading of the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and MSU's Guidelines Governing Privacy and Release of Student Records to assure compliance with Federal law and Michigan State University policy.

A student-written assignment, paper or thesis is an education record, and it is protected by FERPA.

FERPA defines the term education records as:

“records that are directly related to a student and maintained by an educational agency or institution, or by a party acting for the agency or institution.” A test, paper, or other assignment completed by a student constitutes a student's education record under this definition once it has been collected and maintained by a teacher or other school official.



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The U. S. Department of Education’s Family Policy Compliance Office (FPCO), which administers FERPA, recently provided the following statement regarding Turnitin.

If a student’s name or other personally identifiable information is attached to the student’s paper, an instructor or other school official may not release the paper to the Turnitin plagiarism service without the student’s prior written consent. A paper released to Turnitin without any personally identifiable information may be archived and used by Turnitin, without prior written consent, so long as there is no personally identifiable information attached to the information. Finally, nothing in FERPA prevents a student from disclosing his or her own written work to a plagiarism prevention service on a voluntary basis. However, an educational institution may not require students to waive their FERPA rights and agree to wholesale disclosures of their education records, in personally identifiable form to a plagiarism protection service as a condition of taking classes or otherwise receiving educational instruction from the institution.

Further, FPCO suggests that a code could be assigned to each paper – a code that is known only to the instructor who submits the record and the Turnitin system. The “code” may not be a student’s SSN, personal identification number (PID), or other identifier that can be linked to the student by any party.

At Michigan State University, student work is also protected by the Code of Teaching Responsibility, Item 5, which includes this statement:

“Term papers and other comparable projects are the property of students who prepare them.”

Although not addressed in this memorandum, there is also debate about whether Turnitin violates copyright law.

To learn more about FERPA and MSU’s Guidelines, visit www.reg.msu.edu, and click on Privacy Guidelines under General Information. If you have questions about FERPA and MSU’s Guidelines, please contact Ginny Angell, Associate Registrar. The Office of the Registrar consults with the Office of General Counsel as needed.

CC: Virginia Angell, Associate Registrar
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Lou Anna K. Simon, President
Kim Wilcox, Provost
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