College grapples with plagiarism incident and its impact on campus

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WHEN STUDENT SPEAKER

Riordan Frost ‘10 quoted Shakespeare during his Commencement address last month, he began and ended with the very pointed and clearly articulated words, “quote” and “end quote.” Students erupted in laughter, and some in the audience thought it was an inside joke.

It was far from a joke, but Mr. Frost’s very deliberate “quotes” during his speech provided a light moment following a painful campus conversation last semester. The conversation was sparked by last semester’s revelation that Peter St. John, our 2009 student Commencement speaker, had plagiarized entire sections of his speech from noted author Barbara Kingsolver. The case was adjudicated by the confidential campus judicial system, because Mr. St. John was a student when he misrepresented the author’s work as his own.

The administration learned of the plagiarism in late November via an anonymous note. We immediately launched an investigation and informed Ms. Kingsolver of the theft of her work. At that time, and throughout the ensuing discussion, we were advised by legal counsel that disclosing details of the incident or the disciplinary proceeding would be a violation of federal laws protecting student privacy.

In April, after a small correction was printed in this magazine, The College Voice reported on the incident at length — and sparked a campus conversation. Some students and faculty questioned the value of an honor code that failed to prevent such a blatant violation. Others, misinformed about the outcome of the case, questioned the efficacy of the judicial system. And — most painful to me — some accused the administration of deliberately seeking to obscure an embarrassing incident, which of course was never our intention.

Although Voice editors and writers got some key details wrong in their reporting, I am grateful to them for making the incident more public. An honor code can only be effective if it is always foremost in the minds of its adherents. The Voice’s coverage of the plagiarism has revived discussion of the value of the Honor Code and the shared values on which it rests. This complements a systematic re-examination of the Honor Code the College began in September, a very positive step for the campus community.

Already this spring, the Student Government Association brought together students, faculty, staff and administrators for an Honor Code Workshop. Many faculty members discussed the incident with students in class. The Dean of the Faculty is planning additional programs on academic integrity for the fall semester.

The incident was difficult for me because I have personally worked to promote transparent communications in this community that is built on mutual trust and respect. In retrospect, it is clear to me that even within the legal restrictions, we could have — and should have — made our statement in CC: Connecticut College Magazine more informative and prominent.

We still cannot discuss the process or the specific sanctions, but this column is part of my ongoing commitment to be as open about this incident as we legally can be.

In the end, disappointed as I am by Mr. St. John’s inexplicable act, I am heartened to see emerge a serious, constructive campus conversation about honor and integrity. This was a painful episode, but I believe that we learned from it, and the College will emerge stronger for having grappled with it.