Abstract Discussion:
Wednesday, February 7th, 2007 @ 6:45 in the Sunken Lounge of the DC

Maureen and Professor Flatley
An Honor Council Trial
Released February 2007

Introduction:

Maureen, a Bryn Mawr freshman, was taking a Haverford class taught by Professor Flatley. Maureen handed in a draft of a paper, and while reading it Professor Flatley became suspicious of plagiarism and checked his suspicions using the internet. He found that much of the work was copied verbatim from a website, and after the next class meeting he confronted Maureen and asked her to contact the appropriate authority. She agreed and spoke with Bryn Mawr’s Honor Board, who referred her to Haverford’s Honor Council since the incident took place in a Haverford class. Eventually, both Maureen and her professor submitted e-mails to Council. Soon afterwards, Council received a second e-mail from Professor Flatley adding that he had noticed a subsequent instance of plagiarism in Maureen’s work. Honor Council received official statements from both parties and reached consensus on a suspicion of violation.

Fact-Finding:

Professor Flatley’s Statement:
Professor Flatley described how he initially became suspicious while reading Maureen’s work. He had assigned a draft of a five-page paper about Irish Holidays, and while perusing Maureen’s paper he noticed that many of her comments were off-topic and seemed to have been taken from an outside source. He noted on her draft that if she were using outside information, she should cite it appropriately. At this point he did not yet suspect plagiarism, stating that such mistakes are common in first drafts. However, he soon came across a segment of writing that was written in a smaller size than the rest of the text. Since it looked to Professor Flatley that this item had been copied and pasted from another source, he typed the segment into Google and found its origin, a SparkNotes page on Ireland. After looking over the SparkNotes page, he realized that entire sections of Maureen’s draft were in fact taken word for word from the internet. He confronted Maureen after the next class.

On the same day as the confrontation, a second assignment had been due prior to class – a shorter commentary on St. Patrick’s Day. While reviewing this paper, Professor Flatley determined that Maureen had again copied writing from a SparkNotes page and e-mailed her about this second act of plagiarism.
Professor Flatley provided the jury with side-by-side copies of the plagiarized website and Maureen’s papers. He had highlighted the items in question, and it was apparent that large segments of text were not Maureen’s own work.

Maureen’s Statement:
Maureen explained to the jury that when she was writing her papers for Professor Flatley’s class, she felt very overwhelmed. She had been sick for days and had other papers that demanded much of her attention. Maureen said that she found the class material very challenging and different from that which she had encountered before. When it came time to write the draft of her paper, she couldn’t gather much information from her own notes and so she turned to the internet for help. When she entered “Irish Holidays” into the Google search engine, it provided her with a SparkNotes page about the subject. Maureen explained to the jury that she had originally planned to use the online source as a “springboard” for her own argument.

Maureen also admitted that she turned to the same source when she encountered trouble in writing the second paper shortly afterwards. As a freshman, Maureen said that she was not fully aware of the resources, such as the writing center, available to students. She also told the jury that she was not exactly clear on the details of proper citation or of Haverford’s Honor Code. Maureen did admit that she knew her decision to copy and paste was wrong, but she was so stressed and confused that she couldn’t see a better option at the time.

Questions From the Jury:
The jury wished to clarify several points:

When asked whether he had checked Maureen’s earlier assignments for plagiarism, Professor Flatley explained that the two previous response papers had asked for personal reflections and had not been text based, so he did not believe that plagiarism was an issue.

Professor Flatley was asked whether he had specifically addressed issues of plagiarism and proper citation in class. He responded that he had told the class to cite page numbers for information taken from the primary sources, but that students were not expected to refer to secondary sources so he had assumed such a discussion was unnecessary.

When asked whether she had considered asking for an extension on the assignments in question, Maureen explained that, while she had been aware that an extension was an option, she did not realize that it was a resource students commonly took advantage of. As a result, she never seriously considered the possibility.

In response to further questions from the jury, Maureen stated that she had never been taught how to properly cite sources and did not have a firm understanding of what citations were.
Finally, Maureen informed the jury that prior to her confrontation she had never read the Haverford Honor Code and had never signed the Bryn Mawr Honor Code.

**Deliberations:**

In its deliberations the jury discussed the facts that Maureen was in her first semester as a student at Bryn Mawr and that she had neither read nor signed the Honor Code. Jurors were concerned by her lack of knowledge of the Honor Code and worried that this was common among non-Haverford students enrolled in courses at Haverford. Several jurors also expressed concerns that Maureen had not been forthcoming with information about her acts, only admitting as much as she was forced to (prior to the trial she had denied copying and pasting material until Professor Flatley produced irrefutable evidence of her having done so).

While discussing the issue of “gross plagiarism” during its deliberations, the jury found itself faced with some ambiguity in interpreting the Code. At the most recent Plenary, a resolution was passed excising the clause concerning gross plagiarism from the Honor Code. However, until the new Honor Code is ratified in the spring, the old version technically remains in force. In the end, the jury concluded that the gravity of Maureen’s violation could be fully addressed without the use of the term. The jury concluded, in light of the extent of Maureen’s plagiarism and her admission that she had known at the time she was writing the paper that her actions were wrong, that she had violated the Honor Code.

The jury came to consensus on the following statement of violation with all jurors consenting:

*Maureen violated Haverford’s Academic Honor Code by knowingly representing another’s ideas and words as her own. In two separate documents the plagiarism was found to be extensive.*

**Circumstantial Portion:**

*Questions From the Jury:*
The jury reconvened to discuss the circumstantial portion of the trial, and the following issues were among those covered.

Maureen restated that at the time she wrote the papers, she had been sick. In addition, the doctors were not sure what was wrong, and this was very stressful for her.

At the time of the first incident, Maureen was also working on papers for two other courses. When questioned by a juror, Maureen responded that both of these papers “turned out well,” and that she had not plagiarized either of them.
In response to another juror’s question, Maureen admitted that she had tried to adjust some of the words and phrases to make the copied material blend with her own opinions. She didn’t manage to fully accomplish this by the paper’s due date, though.

Maureen also added that she didn’t feel comfortable approaching Professor Flatley, a first-year teacher, for help. She was hesitant to contact him about her struggles in the course, hoping she could solve them herself.

Maureen explained that, since the paper was a draft, she had hoped that maybe Professor Flatley wouldn’t notice, and she could start anew once she wasn’t so ill and stressed out.

When asked by the jurors about her previous knowledge of citation standards and the Honor Code, Maureen reiterated that she wasn’t fully familiar with either. She said that neither her high school nor her writing seminar course had adequately acquainted her with how to cite properly, and that she wasn’t aware that the Haverford Honor Code applied to Bryn Mawr students in Haverford courses.

The jurors then asked both parties for suggested resolutions. As a first-year teacher, Professor Flatley was unsure of “normal” proceedings and hesitated to dictate resolutions. However, he did acknowledge that Maureen felt sorry for what she had done, and mentioned that he would feel comfortable failing her for the assignments but not for the entire course. Professor Flatley also suggested that Maureen write a paper on plagiarism and writing resources.

Maureen, referencing a previous plagiarism case, suggested similar resolutions. They included reading both Haverford’s and Bryn Mawr’s Honor Codes, receiving zeros for her papers, reading a document of the professor’s choice on plagiarism, being separated from Haverford for two semesters, working as a Bryn Mawr customs person to help freshmen in stressful situations, and visiting the writing center once a month.

While Maureen did suggest separation, she also said that she wasn’t quite sure what it entailed, and the jury assumed that she had based her suggestion on the other aforementioned plagiarism case.

**Deliberations:**

The jury then discussed several points before arriving at tentative resolutions:

Jurors were in support of recommending that Maureen receive a 0.0 on both plagiarized assignments, but still have the opportunity to pass the course.

There was a significant amount of deliberation concerning separation. As a Bryn Mawr student, the jury’s only power would be to separate her academically and/or socially from Haverford, which would mean that she could not take classes and/or visit Haverford’s campus for any reason, respectively. Social separation was soon ruled out, since Maureen’s actions did not seem to indicate any need for complete removal from
Haverford’s campus. One juror maintained that any separation would be too harsh, while the rest eventually agreed on academic separation but disagreed on the appropriate length.

Some jurors felt that two semesters would be punitive rather than educational. Others pointed out that since Maureen was only a first semester freshman, two semesters of academic separation would give her a better opportunity to reflect on her actions beyond the time period of spring registration. Several jurors thought that, given the severity of Maureen’s actions and her repeat offense two semesters of separations were most appropriate. Others, though, felt that Maureen’s freshman status and the apparent level of reflection already performed demanded only one semester. There were concerns that Maureen was not being trusted to continue reflecting on her own after one semester of separation. One juror still felt that any separation was inappropriate. Debate on this issue continued throughout the discussion.

Jurors then debated the significance of Maureen’s claims of unfamiliarity with proper citation and with the Honor Code. While jurors agreed that educational institutions should take responsibility for teaching such items, they also agreed that Maureen’s knowledge of her wrongdoing was evident, and thus her choice could not be blamed only on ignorance. At this point it was also noted that she made the same wrong choice a week later without seeking any clarification on citation or the course in general.

Jurors agreed that a letter to the community would be in order, and that no restrictions would be placed on the letter so as to allow for Maureen’s voice and opinion to be heard.

Jurors also felt comfortable with suggesting that Maureen either complete some form of community service or a written assignment revolving around plagiarism.

The jury came to consensus on several tentative resolutions and recommendations:

1. Maureen will be separated academically from Haverford for two semesters.*
2. Maureen should receive a 0.0 on both assignments.
3. Maureen will read a document of Professor Flatley’s choosing on plagiarism and respond with a paper (length to be specified by professor).
4. Maureen will write a letter to the community to be released with the abstract.
5. We recommend that Honor Council post fliers at the start of each semester reminding students taking courses at Haverford that they are under the Haverford Honor Code.
6. We recommend that Honor Council work with the registrar to make sure that both the online and paper course guides include a prominent reminder that all students taking courses at Haverford College are bound by our Honor Code.

*Two jurors stood outside of consensus on this resolution, but felt that their objections had been heard and engaged with by the group.

Presentation of Resolutions:
Professor Flatley and Maureen both joined the jury for the presentation of tentative resolutions. When they were read aloud, both parties found them fair and reasonable.

Maureen inquired as to the nature of her letter to the community, and was informed that it was open and could include comments on her experience, her reflections, or the trial.

Jury members felt comfortable with the level of trust apparent between Professor Flatley and Maureen, and came to consensus that the tentative resolutions be made final. The same two jurors stood outside, but did not block, consensus on one resolution.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Is academic separation an effective means of stimulating an individual found to have violated the Honor Code to constructively reflect on the meaning of his or her actions? Is academic separation of a Bryn Mawr student from Haverford a meaningful and appropriate resolution, or does it end up being excessively punitive or, conversely, ineffective?

2. Should the fact that a plagiarized document is a rough draft as opposed to the final version of a paper have an effect on the trial’s resolutions?

3. To what extent is Haverford responsible for providing details about citation methods? That is, can it be assumed common knowledge that copying another’s work is wrong, or must this be addressed in class?

4. How can non-Haverford students be helped to better understand their relationship with Haverford’s Honor Code?
To the Haverford Community:

Having gone through this entire experience, I can only hope that my story will help other people in similar situations. I turned to the internet for help when I was too intimidated to ask my professor for help with an assignment. I was sick at the time and in addition, didn't feel comfortable with the material I was writing on. Never the less, this does not excuse my actions. I recognize I made a collection of bad choices when overwhelmed and perplexed by my work. I now see that I should have confronted my professor when I first became confused. Having been in college for a short time, I didn’t realize that there were a collection of different resources I could have taken advantage of. I now know that even if I didn’t feel comfortable speaking with my professor, I could have turned to: the writing center, my dean, a peer mentor, and/or looked into finding a tutor. These are all sources that have been established to help individuals, like myself, when they become overwhelmed and need some extra help. Both, the Haverford community and Bryn Mawr community are designed to help students with what ever obstacles they might face. We are all extremely lucky to be apart of such caring institutions that are here for us even when we make mistakes.

I understand the severity of my mistake and take responsibility for my judgments and actions. I consider myself very fortunate to be given a second chance to continue to work and learn at Bryn Mawr and Haverford. As difficult as this situation is for me, I have learned a lot about myself and what I want to be. This experience will always serve to remind me that when I am struggling with a problem, whether it is personal or academic, to never let fear stop me from confronting someone. I hope that by sharing my experience, other people will be motivated to seek help when they become overwhelmed and feel they can’t deal with a specific problem on their own. Unfortunately, we will never be able to eliminate stress in our lives completely. However, we can learn to manage our stress and work with others to help us get through difficult situations. There are ways of getting through tough situations and there will always be a network of people who will do their best to help you in any aspect of your life. No one should ever feel that they don’t have somewhere or someone to turn to for help.

I am extremely thankful for everyone who supported me throughout this process. While this experience was very painful for me, it has allowed me to evaluate my academic career. I recognize I made a series of bad choices but, I will not let this experience stop me from achieving my personal and academic goals. I see this experience as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to see where I am now in my life and where I envision myself being when I graduate.

Sincerely,

“Maureen”