Fri, May 11, 2001
Rutgers study confirms that web makes cheating easier
By Cara Branigan, Assistant Editor, eSchool News

A new study from Rutgers University confirms what many educators have feared: The internet makes cheating easier. More than half of the 4,500 students from the 25 high schools participating in the study say they use the internet to plagiarize. But it appears the internet is merely the means not the primary motivation for those students who copy text from the web and pass it off as their own. Most of the cheaters said they would have plagiarized anyway. Although 2,430 students (54 percent) said they plagiarized from the internet, only 270 of them plagiarized from the internet alone, meaning just 6 percent of the students plagiarized for the first time because of the web.

"The internet has not yet created that many new plagiarizers," said Rutgers Faculty of Management Professor Donald McCabe. But for 48 percent of students who already were in the habit of plagiarizing, the internet has become a tool that simplifies verbatim copying.

"It's so easy, and the students who were doing it before are just doing it in a more serious way—taking larger amounts of text," McCabe said.

McCabe's survey also found that three-quarters (74 percent) of the students said they had engaged in one or more instances of serious cheating on a test or examination. Almost three-quarters (72 percent) admitted to plagiarizing on written assignments and submitting work done by someone else.

"Most of these students were halfway through high school. They should understand what is original research and what should be cited," he said. "There are [still] some misconceptions about what must be cited."

McCabe, who is a national authority on academic integrity, recommends that schools encourage students not to cheat.

"They need to make a policy and share it with their students," McCabe said. "You have to clarify your expectations."

Barbara Stein, senior policy analyst for the National Education Association, said she wondered whether these students knew they were plagiarizing. She believes there should be more education in schools about copyright issues, especially because of how easy it is to copy and paste text from the internet.

"It was unethical then, and it's unethical now. It's just easier now," Stein said. "There may be an even greater need to educate students about what is ethical in this day and age."

She added, "Some schools probably do do this when they introduce the internet, but students need to understand their rights and responsibilities on the internet."

Elliott Levine, a spokesman for AbleSoft Inc. and a former Long Island school administrator, said the best way to help students avoid plagiarism and cheating is for teachers to keep track of students' work as it evolves and be leery of static reports that just magically appear at the due date.

"Throughout time, that's really been a tried and true way for a teacher to keep tabs on the progress of a child," Levine said. As students complete an assignment, teachers should ask them to submit their outline, their research, and rough drafts along the way.

"When students go through that long of a process, first, they're learning good habits, and second, it's not that easy to plagiarize," Levine said. It's also a good way to teach students time-management skills, he said.

Before the advent of the internet, "When a student had a term paper to do, the teacher knew the student only had a few resources to turn to," Levine said. "The internet is a good research tool, but unfortunately it's so simple to cut and paste a whole document virtually."

Tools like AbleSoft's rSchool Detective let teachers compare student work to documents on the internet to help them detect potential instances of plagiarism.

"Even the software itself can't be an end-all product," Levine said. "It's just one of the tools and strategies a teacher can use to monitor the kids' progress."

He believes teachers should start informing students about copyright issues and plagiarism in middle school.

"Middle school is where you start seeing the larger assignments and less contact with the teacher, because [students] begin going from period to period," Levine said. "Unfortunately, taking short cuts for this age group is all too convenient."