

CASE STUDY: Plagiarism in MBA Application Essays



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*Carrie Marcinkevage,
MBA Admissions Director
Penn State Smeal College of Business*

• Penn State’s Smeal College of Business offers highly ranked undergraduate, MBA, executive MBA, Ph.D., and executive education opportunities to more than 5,500 students at all levels. Featuring academic departments of accounting, finance, marketing, insurance and real estate, management, and supply chain and information systems, the college is also home to major research centers such as the Center for Supply Chain Research, the Institute for the Study of Business Markets, the Farrell Center for Corporate Innovation and Entrepreneurship, the Center for Global Business Studies, and the Center for the Management of Technological and Organizational Change.

• The Penn State Smeal MBA program places a very strong emphasis on *Principled Leadership* from orientation through graduation. They endeavor to develop leaders for today’s challenges and tomorrow’s opportunities. Applicants are required to sign the Smeal Honor Code when submitting an application and agree to embark upon this path in the same spirit.

• **The Challenge** During the application review process, the MBA admissions committee identified cases of plagiarism in numerous applicants’ Principled Leadership essays. It appeared that segments of several articles on the topic, readily available via web search, were copied or paraphrased and included in applicants’ essays. According to Carrie Marcinkevage, Smeal’s MBA Admissions Director, “In one case, three of four essay paragraphs were taken directly from an online article.”

• **The Journey** After the initial discovery of plagiarism, the Penn State Smeal MBA admissions team reviewed 360 applications still in process and found 29 applicants had submitted essays that contained plagiarism. Penn State’s actions ranged from asking 4 applicants to rewrite for borderline plagiarism, to denying 15 applicants without interviews, canceling 9 interviews, and rescinding one applicant’s admission.

(cont’d.)

After the painstaking discovery of these cases, the decision to find a tool to vet future essays was critical. “Our strong focus on Principled Leadership and the Smeal Honor Code makes it critical for us to maintain integrity in the admissions process,” says Carrie Marcinkevage.

The Discovery Turnitin for Admissions was launched in December 2009. Bloomberg Businessweek wrote an article about the new Turnitin for Admissions service at the end of January, just prior to the discovery of plagiarism in the MBA admissions essays. After managing the plagiarism issue and then reading the article, Carrie Marcinkevage contacted iParadigms to investigate the new service.

The Solution Turnitin for Admissions is a new service created for admissions professionals to help them make fair and more informed choices when evaluating applicant created documents. Personal statements, admissions essays, scholarship essays, and other applicant-created documents are verified to help discover plagiarism, recycled submissions, duplicate responses, purchased documents, and other seemingly transparent problems.

Turnitin for Admissions is a web-based service that compares submitted documents to a massive database of Internet content, subscription content, and previously submitted documents to create a comprehensive Similarity Report. The multi-layered Similarity Report highlights matching text in a side-by-side report and provides links to any significant matches found within the document.

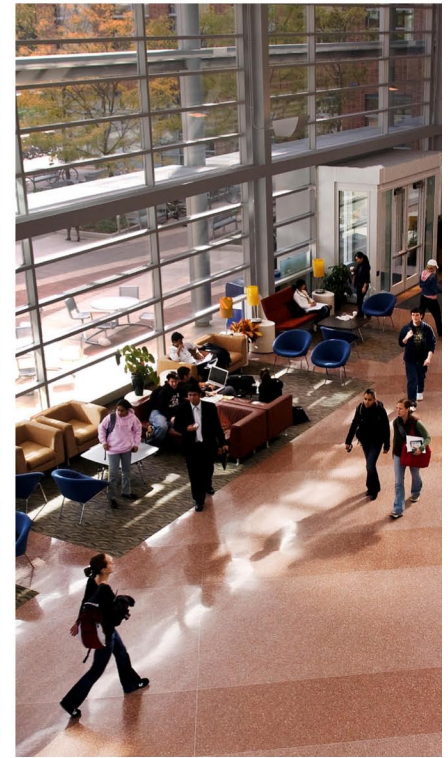
The Implementation “We are using Turnitin for Admissions with the MBA program to establish new processes and best practices. All essays are authenticated through Turnitin for Admissions before we take any further actions. Every report is individually reviewed, and any questionable cases receive a second review to determine whether they violate Penn State plagiarism guidelines,” says Carrie Marcinkevage.



Marcinkevage believes that this method is the most consistent and equitable way to ensure ethics in essays across all candidates. “The highest benefit is to the applicant. Our job is to look for positives – the great attributes a candidate might bring to the program and how Penn State might be a great fit. We can’t maintain that focus if we’re cynically seeking plagiarism. Let the software be the bad guy. Free us to find great students.”

The Results The admissions staff determined that the plagiarism review, analysis, decision-making, and communication for this case took over 150 hours to complete. With Turnitin for Admissions, they estimate they could have reduced that time to 12 hours. In addition, their confidence in the quality of the review as well as the consistency of documentation and communication would be greatly increased. The software removes human error and limited memory, and it ensures equitable assessment of every individual.

The Penn State Smeal MBA admissions team has implemented Turnitin for Admissions in the initial essay review process, ensuring that all candidates’ essays are authentic before proceeding with further review. The admissions team saves an hour for every 5 essay sets reviewed, and they are freed to focus on their primary purpose – finding the next class of MBAs. Their students and faculty are supportive of the initiative for its alignment with the Smeal Honor Code and focus on Principled Leadership. The team’s findings will be documented and considered for further expansion within Smeal and Penn State University.



Turnitin for Admissions (TiiA) is the fastest, easiest and most accurate way to check for plagiarized or fraudulent content in college and university admissions materials. TiiA automatically analyzes materials for instances of unoriginal content, enabling admissions officers to quickly identify plagiarism, recycled submissions, duplicate responses, purchased documents, and other potential violations of application standards. TiiA is based on the same technology as Turnitin – the world leader in originality checking and plagiarism prevention, used by half a million educators at over 9,000 educational institutions in 126 countries.

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