

Academic Honesty: The Backbone of Higher Education

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In the spirit of the impending presidential election and, for seniors such as myself, the crunch to complete college applications, I would like to talk about plagiarism, an issue that infects our academic institutions and our nation's politics.

On July 18th, during the primetime broadcast of the Republican National Convention, the world witnessed a blatant, unprofessional act of plagiarism when Melania Trump gave her national address. In her speech, Melania Trump took several key ideas and phrases, relating to discipline and raising children, directly from Michelle Obama's first national address, which was given eight years ago during the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Taking advantage of the controversy, news organizations relentlessly attacked the speech and launched accusations of plagiarism upon Trump's campaign. Soon after this occurred, several individuals, including Trump's campaign manager, Paul Manafort (who, unsurprisingly, has since resigned), stood up for Melania Trump and her speechwriters by denying such allegations of plagiarism. He claimed that her supposedly plagiarized phrases were simply "common words and values" (CNN) and that "To think that she'd be cribbing Michelle Obama's words is unacceptable" (CNN).

I seriously beg to differ.

When looking at Michelle Obama's speech and Melania Trump's speech side by side, it is undeniably clear that the latter plagiarized the former. Through analysis of the typed out speeches, not only does Melania Trump's speech contain rough reconstructions of several of Michelle Obama's key points, but there are also instances of blatant plagiarism. For instance, both women, while making similar points on how their parents impressed important values upon them, used the phrase: "that you work hard for what you want in life, that your word is your bond and that you do what you say". Despite Mr. Manafort's assertions, this is an inarguable case of plagiarism. If Melania Trump had delivered this speech as a student at St. Mark's, or at any academic institution, there is no doubt she would be having a chat with the student Disciplinary Committee.

As students, the words "plagiarism" and "academic dishonesty" are a part of our everyday vocabulary. Through lectures given by advisors and our signing countless academic honesty agreements, the educational taboo of plagiarism is ingrained within our conscience. However, despite the steep disciplinary penalties that schools associate with such violations, many students fall victim to the temptation to plagiarize regardless. To the extent of my memory, disciplinary action in response to plagiarism has taken place seemingly every year that I have been at St. Mark's, and I am sure that this is the case in most secondary schools. Why does this continue to happen even though students are warned extensively about the negative disciplinary outcomes

that will take place with plagiarism? This temptation to plagiarize haunts us students because we are trained to become independent, successful scholars at the cost of our sanity. In preparatory schools, we students are pushed beyond our comfort zones so that we can adapt to the work demands of college and beyond, and in the process we become worn-out and anxious. When we become stressed or pressured for time, it is easy for temptations such as the internet to entice us to cheat, even if we're aware of the dangers of plagiarism. This happens to the best of us, and no student is completely immune to this cycle.

Although the preparatory school experience has its undeniable perks and benefits, it is also true that it often exerts an extraordinary amount of stress pressure upon its students. For this reason, many students find it unjust that our Disciplinary Committees enforce plagiarism with devastating, transcript-damaging consequences. However, I find such enforcement to be justified. Though I sympathize with the many phenomenal students who fall victim to this system due to high levels of stress and momentary poor judgement, I believe that this enforcement is a necessary, foundational aspect of all academic institutions as it preserves the backbone of higher education. Within our institutions, instructors tirelessly try to steer us away from plagiarism so that students can learn to think critically, generate original thoughts, and master difficult concepts on our own. We cannot become independent, successful individuals if we cannot even learn to work and think for ourselves within the comfort of own private institutions.

The most jarring thing about Melania Trump's plagiarism scandal is not necessarily the plagiarism, but the shameless audacity with which she committed the crime. Perhaps this scandal more so than ever justifies the harsh disciplinary consequences schools impress upon its students. The thing about plagiarism is that it doesn't come down to only the negative consequences it may engender, but more importantly, to morality. In this political climate of political incorrectness and immorality, it seems more important than ever for our generation, the future leaders of the world, to uphold academic integrity and honor the capstone of education: the ability to grow as independent, critical thinkers.