Statement and Policy on Academic Dishonesty

I suspect most academic dishonesty happens without a great deal of forethought, but it’s worth thinking about. I’d like to see it reduced, both for the sake of the academic community (gaining unfair advantages in grading through academic dishonesty compromises the integrity of the assessment system, and thereby harms others), and for the sake of the would-be cheater (your character is significantly shaped by the actions that you take).

Academic dishonesty, by which I mean cheating (for instance, on exams) and plagiarism (passing the ideas or work of others off as your own in essays) is both wrong and irrational. The wrong part seems pretty straightforward. If others’ grades reflect their own work without cheating but your grade reflects your work plus access to resources others, following the rules, don’t make use of, then you are gaining an unfair advantage over others. And for this reason, universities have policies for punishing academic dishonesty. As I said, that’s pretty straightforward.

But the irrational part, at least in the case of plagiarism, is two fold. Part of the irrationality is simply that you might get caught and then punished. A failing grade on an assignment or a failing grade for a course is, presumably, an undesired cost and so, you risk earning that undesired cost for a relatively small boost in your grade. You stand to lose more in getting caught than you stand to gain in not getting caught. But academic dishonesty in the form of plagiarism is irrational in another way. To plagiarize, a student essentially looks for ideas and writing on the subject matter of your paper assignment. Whether you just don’t understand something that well when studying it directly (on the basis of the assigned materials) or if you’re just too lazy to have done the work, you go in search of help. If you find some stuff worth relying on, you can borrow it, without citing it, and hope the teacher doesn’t recognize what you’ve borrowed. That’s plagiarism. But think about what you just did. Going out and looking for material that helps you understand what you are studying and what you are assigned to write about is actually something that universities try to train students to do. It’s called research. You actually get credit for it, provided you acknowledge that you made use of another person’s work (that person’s ideas, or that person’s words). Providing citations for the research you do basically clears you of an academic dishonesty charge. So, it’s hard to figure why a student would try to get away with plagiarism given that there is an easy out, one for which you actually might get credit—acknowledging your consultation of others’ work.

Does citation guarantee you a good grade? No. If you borrow from an inappropriate source (a source that gets it wrong, or that isn’t actually connected to what you were asked to write about), then citing it doesn’t help. Further, if you submit a paper that is nothing but the citation of others’ work, then the paper doesn’t reflect any of YOUR work, and you aren’t likely to get a passing grade for such a submission. And there may be assignments in which consulting outside sources is prohibited. Such assignments stipulate this for a reason—it is important to be able to work through original sources, in philosophy and other disciplines, on your own.

So research, and citation aren’t always options for papers. But where there is no restriction, plagiarism just seems, well, stupid. If you consult outside work and it influences your writing (even in places where you don’t quote it), provide a citation. That immunizes you from a charge of academic dishonesty.

Given my explanation and my goals, it is my policy to assess stiff penalties for academic dishonesty on assignments in my course.