

To: An Open Letter to Incoming JD Students  
From: A student convicted of Plagiarism  
Date: May 2008  
Re: CAUTION-Plagiarism

### The Day the S\*!t Hit The Fan

Two days away from graduating law school I felt happy and lighter than I had felt in three years. Except for the Bar, I was finished with classes, exams, and papers. My family was en route, traveling across country to see me graduate. I noticed an email from Professor Green, a professor I hardly knew with the subject “Please read.” The first line of the email read “I regret to inform you that Professor Jane Doe has filed a complaint against you, reporting a violation of the Conduct Code in connection with your enrollment in her Spring 2008 course.” My heart stopped. All of the air sucked out of the room. I panicked. I ran from the computer to see the professor that sent the email. Surely it must be a mistake.

I saw Professor Green in the hallway. He told me that it was very serious. I followed him into his office, unsure of what was about to happen. I allegedly plagiarized a final paper in a class. Plagiarism was something I heard about as a 1L, if not sooner, but I don’t take risks with my future. I was confused by the allegation; there must have been some mistake. Professor Jane Doe attached her complaint to the paper I submitted with plagiarized text highlighted and attached sources with the very same words. Several paragraphs of my paper appeared to be word-for-word copy of this “borrowed” source.

I felt confused. I didn’t know how this could have happened. It was just two days before graduation; surely I knew how to write a paper without plagiarizing. Thoughts swirled through my head. What does all of this mean? Will I graduate? How can I defend myself? Do I even defend myself? But then I realized that I never intended to do this. Surely the lack of intent, necessary for conviction of a typical crime, would save me. Unfortunately though, intent is not a necessary element of this offense. Even negligent plagiarism is still plagiarism. Nevertheless, I explained to Professor Green that I never meant for this to happen. I had no idea that I had done such a thing. I broke down and cried. Forty-eight hours away from graduation, and it seemed that all of my dreams were about to end.

The next few days I spent angry and hating myself. I looked for someone or something to blame, but I was the only person to be blamed. More than anything I wanted to understand how I let this happen. How could I single handedly ruin my entire life because of some utterly stupid mistake of epic proportions. I tried to understand what I did, but I could not stop thinking about all of the possible ramifications. What if I didn't graduate? What if my employer found out? What if they kicked me out of school and the last three years were all for not. I researched plagiarism. Maybe if I understood why other people did it, I will discover why I did. But it's no help.

The day before graduation, I met with Professor Green, Professor Doe and the Assistant Dean for Students. I felt nervous. Prof. Green's role was to investigate the complaint filed against me by Professor Doe. The complaint that I had violated the Conduct Code by plagiarizing the final paper of a course I had just completed; my last class in law school.

My attorney arrived and she tried to calm my nervousness by revealing that she had recently handled a similar case at the law school. She tried to reassure me that everything would work out. I felt dread not reassured.

The meeting seemed surreal. I tried to find words to express how stupid and regretful I felt. The stress of winding up three years of academic work as well as preparing to move out of Concord coupled with poor time management skills led to a paper that wasn't ready to be submitted. It all seemed so remote now. I didn't intend to plagiarize. It just happened. I violated the Conduct Code. Tears flowed down my cheeks. I wanted to vomit.

Professor Green, the Conduct Code Officer (i.e., prosecutor), was a professor I hadn't known well during my three years at law school. He listened patiently then said he would file a charge with the Conduct Code Committee alleging negligent plagiarism. Together, Prof. Green, the Assistant Dean of Students, my attorney and I created a Joint Stipulation Agreement that admitted the action of negligent plagiarism and listed jointly agreed upon sanctions under the Conduct Code for the violation. The Stipulation required me to write a letter of apology to Professor Doe, to have a private letter of reprimand placed in my unofficial file, to craft this essay written to "help other students develop a greater awareness and understanding of plagiarism, and "complete an exam or

write another paper to fulfill the requirements” of the course, “even if [I] earn an ‘F’ in the course.”

The Dean agreed to let me participate in graduation only on a “ceremonial” basis pending the outcome of the Conduct Code Hearing. I would receive an empty diploma tube and that only at the conclusion of the investigation would I be entitled to a diploma. My participation in the graduation would “not lend any official authority on [my] academic or graduation status.” Odd as it sounded, this was good news because my family – my parents, grandparents, siblings – had arrived in town for graduation the night before. They did not know what I was going through. I dared not tell them and see the disappointment on their faces. I could not tell anyone, not even my best friends in law school. They all knew something was wrong, but I explained it away as family stress.

Prof. Green suggested that I view graduation as being an event for the family. He said not to think about it being for myself, but for their benefit; so that they could see me graduate. His advice helped me get through the day, though at times it proved difficult to keep my composure. I was depressed and wanted to cry. Instead, I walked across the stage, received the empty diploma tube and heard cheering family and friends.

But there was unfinished business after my family left. Five days after graduation the Conduct Code Committee held the hearing. I hadn’t slept the night before. My mind churned all night; it churned all day. The thought of preparing for the bar exam was a joke. I tried to read the study aides, but what were they saying? Did it even matter anymore? Did I have a future in law?

At the hearing I entered the room with my attorney. Seated across from me were the five members of the Conduct Code Committee: one professor, a staff member and three students (one from the first year JD class and two from the second year JD Class). I knew all of these people and was extremely embarrassed and ashamed to be in front of them charged with such a serious violation. At that moment I understand the awkward position that my actions have placed them each in; the position of having to judge me and ultimately determine my future. The hearing proved very difficult to get through. I was unable to maintain my composure and tears flowed down my face. It took all of my strength to look at the Committee members and answer their questions. And what questions they have. They need to understand what I cannot seem to understand. Why

did I do it? I didn't know. My answer doesn't satisfy them. I understood; it did not satisfy me either.

Prof. Green, the Conduct Code Officer, related his findings to the Committee and answered their questions. He expressed to them both in writing and in person that I "fully cooperated with the investigation in an open, honest and truthful manner." He further stated that I "immediately responded to any and all inquiries;" I am "a third year student who is in good standing academically;" I was "motivated and devoted to serving clients and the legal profession well;" I have "shown great remorse about my conduct;" and I have "accepted responsibility for my conduct from the beginning of the Conduct Code investigation." I was hoping against hope that what he said would help. But at that moment I wanted to disappear, to crawl under a rock and die. I pushed the morbid thoughts away and hoped that I would get through it...somehow.

Two hours after I had entered the hearing room and the Committee had spoken with everyone, my attorney, the Dean of Students, the Conduct Code Officer, and me were asked to leave the room and wait elsewhere for the Committee's decision. The minutes dragged on stretching out over my lifetime. Ninety minutes after I left the hearing room, we returned to hear the Committee's decision. My body felt numb.

The Committee decided not to approve the sanctions listed in the Joint Stipulation, but rather they created their own sanctions. And their sanctions are punishing. I would not receive my law degree; a notation was to be made on my transcript that would remain there for a predetermined period of time for any future academic institutions as well as prospective employers to see. All of the air seemed to be sucked out of the room. My life has ended. Anger, frustration and sadness relentlessly spun around my mind. It is all directed at me and only me.

Through all of this, I wished I could somehow change the past. I would do things so differently. Why didn't I just spend more time on the paper? Why didn't I just ask for help if I needed it? All I had to show for my actions are more questions than answers. Did I feel some modicum of happiness? I didn't think so. But then again, did I deserve to? Likely not. My shame and embarrassment prevented me from telling anyone about this until it was all over, and even then I was only able to tell one friend. No one else. It hurts most to be judged by those that love you. To see the look in their eyes as I would

tell them that I plagiarized and my degree was withheld is too much for me. I needed support, but was too ashamed to say anything and too afraid of the reactions to risk it. Maybe support would have helped me get through it all.

After the dust settled, I thought about how this mistake was clearly not worth it because it cost me my degree. Then I thought that the mistake cost me the thousands of dollars paid for law school without anything to show for it. But I finally realized that above all else, this mistake cost me my reputation and integrity. For the first time in many years I have experienced regret. Sometimes the mistakes one makes are the life lessons most needed. Maybe our mistakes are what make our fate...without them what would shape our lives? From this act I must now learn so that I might continue to grow. This is a mistake I would do anything to change. I lost sight of what was important. My integrity is of the utmost of importance, yet my actions were duplicitous. I worked hard in law school and wanted to finish with pride. Instead, I have ruined my education by making an unnecessary, stupid mistake of epic proportions.

**Reference websites available to help understand and prevent plagiarism:**

<http://www.plagiarism.org>

<http://www.mcmirow.com/plagiar.htm>

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/>

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/plagiarism.html>

<http://www11.georgetown.edu/programs/gervase/hc/plagiarism.html>