

## IS COPYING BUREAUCRATIC BOILERPLATE PLAGIARISM?

I recently took the opportunity to recount a practical experience with a university ombudsman. An article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, "[How dare you question my integrity](#)," provided the impetus.

I began by offering the author the following: "Good advice, but a caution seems appropriate. The belief that "investigators" will "ask intelligent questions" is subject to the political influence an investigator [an Ombudsman, in this example] accepts. For example, when [Mr. Gordon Cannon](#), chemistry professor at University of Southern Mississippi, was chosen as ombudsman and asked to investigate faculty who had questioned whether administrators' documents had been plagiarized, he did not "ask intelligent questions," nor review the relevant documents at his disposal.

In addition to ignoring evidence, Mr. Cannon created his own. He had never studied the subject of plagiarism but he asked a few friends whether they would consider copying bureaucratic boilerplate plagiarism? Mr. Cannon did not provide the original or copies of documents or any context to his friends. He merely asked, "Would you consider copying bureaucratic boilerplate plagiarism?" Of course, their answer was "no".

Mr. Cannon reported the results of his findings to the head USM administrator, President Martha Saunders: USM administrators did not plagiarize the documents. If you wonder how we learned Mr. Cannon's approach to assessing whether a document, words, or ideas are plagiarized, we deposed him under oath. Mr. Cannon's report to President Saunders sounded reasonable until he was asked a few questions. For example, how did Mr. Cannon determine whether the documents were plagiarized? Answer: he asked his friends whether bureaucratic boilerplate was plagiarism. The context and documents Mr. Cannon did not disclose to his friends included two documents submitted to the AACSB from USM's College of Business during reaccreditation. One was entitled "Guidelines for Participating and Supporting Faculty." Charles Jordan asked Central Missouri State University for permission to copy it "without proper citation" after it had been copied and the College of Business had been caught copying it "without proper citation" ("Without proper citation" is Professor Jordan's phrase.). The other was The Academic Integrity Policy copied from Syracuse University. The one portion of the Academic Integrity Policy not copied was Syracuse's extensive citation list of sources for its "Academic Integrity Policy." That's right. USM's College of Business copied Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy but not the list of citations at the end of it. Then-Dean Harold Doty reported to the AACSB, after getting caught, that copying Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy was simply "benchmarking." (Benchmarking, however, is defined as comparing something to a standard, not copying documents verbatim.)

Mr. Cannon ignored any information or questions that would cast doubt on his

conclusion. So, my caution to readers about assuming “investigators ask intelligent questions.”

Consequences? Mr. Cannon was put forward as an independent investigator/ombudsman. That was good for USM’s administrators, but made life very difficult for my colleagues. Details and documents obtained through court proceedings and open records requests can be Googled on [usmnews.net](http://usmnews.net).