

Case Study: Peer reviewer allegedly lifts student's thesis work

In 2010, a respected Michigan State University (MSU) professor was forced to retract a review article she authored on genetically engineered crops when a university committee judged that she was guilty of plagiarizing, according to an article by Mathew Miller in the *Lansing State Journal*, published April 7 at www.lansingstatejournal.com.

Miller reported that the tenured professor and researcher, a plant science expert, incorporated a nearly identical paragraph from an unpublished paper by a graduate student into her own review paper without citing it. (The two citations she used for this data were later found to be irrelevant). Sticklen had read the student's article as part of her peer review responsibilities for the journal *Plant Science*.

After reading the professor's article in *Nature Reviews Genetics* and seeing his own work, the student filed a formal complaint, which resulted in the university investigation into the matter. The student said that the paragraph contained "an original synthesis of his own data, the literature data, and . . . a novel idea that was going to be a key element in his thesis," according to Jonathan Gressel, an editor for *Plant Science*, who was quoted in Miller's article.

In her defense, the *Lansing State Journal* reported, the professor apologized for using the material (via email), saying she had made "an honest error." She explained that she was taking medication for a condition that caused problems with her memory. She was on medical leave, and the university should have considered her condition before making the finding. In addition to the public censure, the professor is not eligible to apply for research funds or receive a pay raise for two years.

Questions for discussion: *Did the university act ethically in charging the professor? What does this case teach us about the different roles we play in the process, how our actions affect others, and our sensitivity (individual and collective) to these issues when constructing a scholarship ethic?*

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