It hit Mark Gruntz all at once, while he was sitting flat-broke in an airport in Greece: He had lost credit for three summer courses, wasted $11,474 in student loans and gotten kicked off a boat. All because he hadn’t cited Wikipedia enough in a paper about a movie.

Last week, he and another college student, Allison Routman, were expelled from the Semester at Sea program for violating the University of Virginia’s honor code. The expulsions raised questions for some students about whether the school’s more than 150-year-old tradition is too harsh -- and for others, whether students have a different understanding of plagiarism and research now that online resources make it easy to find information.

The debate is partly generational: those who grew up with the Internet vs. those who didn’t. Many of Gruntz’s and Routman’s classmates were outraged by the punishment. They made “Save Mark” T-shirts, filmed Routman sobbing, signed a petition and wrote letters urging the dean to reconsider. Many argued that Routman and Gruntz hadn’t done anything wrong. Others thought the penalty was far too punitive.

But the honor code at the university is absolute, and so was the verdict.

"When you graduate from U-Va., it means a little more because of the honor system, and I would argue that’s the same for someone taking classes," said Jess Huang, a senior who heads the honor committee. She was not involved in the Summer at Sea case but spoke in general terms. "The honor system is defined by the philosophy and the spirit of integrity that we want to uphold here at the University of Virginia."

Instant Resources

For two months this summer, about 600 students from across the country have been taking classes and studying various cultures on the Semester at Sea boat, which travels from port to port.

It used to be known as a booze cruise, Gruntz said, but for two years, the University of Virginia, with its traditions and rigorous standards, has been the academic sponsor.

The student-run honor code at the University of Virginia is as much a part of the school’s identity as its Jeffersonian history. Every so often, a debate arises over whether the single sanction, expulsion for a guilty verdict, is too drastic.

Every time, students have voted to keep it.

"If you violate our community of trust," Huang said, "you should no longer be a member of it."

Professors and librarians talk about plagiarism and other issues of academic integrity a lot more than they used to, said Barbie Selby, a university librarian, because research is so much easier to do now. It takes just a couple of clicks to copy and paste a passage from an online source into a paper, rather than going to the library, finding the right books and copying something by hand. Even unintentional mistakes are easier.

Online research is by far the most common practice now, Selby said, and it can be confusing. "We want to be as clear as possible about what is and isn't acceptable," she said. With digital sources, things wind up in notes without credit, and people are left unsure what came
from where.

One student wrote, after reading Routman’s paper, that the online encyclopedia Wikipedia was one of the few resources that students had (despite an 8,000-some-volume library and the digital online collection with access to more than 300 databases) and that “it is hard to remember what your thoughts are and what was from Wikipedia.”

Here’s what Gruntz, a 20-year-old kinesiology major at California Baptist University, and Routman, a 21-year-old Ohio University student, said happened when they turned in their first papers in their Global Studies class. They had been asked to watch a movie and tie it to what they had been learning about Europe and World War II.

Routman said she looked at Wikipedia to check some facts about the movie, then wrote a summary of the film and her experiences growing up Jewish. The paper came back with long sections bracketed and the note “from Wikipedia” in the margin. Only a few fragments were identical, she said.

Gruntz cited Wikipedia a couple of times in his paper. "I got in trouble for not citing it enough, I guess," he said by phone from the airport, where he was spending the night because he couldn’t afford a hotel room. "I think I was supposed to put quotations around it."

Gruntz and Routman said the professor, citing previous problems with plagiarism, had spent a class talking about how to write, and cite, properly. They said he reminded students that they could make a conscientious retraction, admit to him in confidence that they had done wrong and essentially wipe the slate clean. Several students did that, Routman said. But she didn’t realize she had done anything wrong.

"It's not like we copied and pasted," Gruntz said, "or bought it online."

Routman, who was waiting for a flight home, too, said: "They got us for paraphrasing. It's a plot summary of a movie. How many different ways are there to tell it?"

The professors involved could not talk about the case. David Gies, a University of Virginia Spanish professor who was academic dean in the summer 2007 trip, said, speaking in general: “I tell my students Wikipedia is not a good source. I would prefer you don’t use it. That said, if you do, cite it like you would any book or journal.” Be honest, he tells them, and don’t try to pass off others’ thoughts as your own.

The honor system is administered differently on the boat, partly because there isn’t time to train students. So faculty members judge students.

Separately, Gruntz and Routman faced a panel of faculty members at a table. Routman said, "I was scared out of my mind."

Gruntz was shaking. "It was like a kangaroo court. . . . I just felt like I was being hammered. I had no hope." He asked for a break part of the way through to try to calm down. His roommate, Ben Magnone, told him to stay calm, not answer leading questions and stick to what he wanted to tell them.

Magnone said later that it was unfair, especially compared with the much less stringent punishments given to students caught drinking.

The honor system on the ship deals only with academic dishonesty, Gies said, so other infractions have initial penalties less drastic than expulsion.

"It was basically five on one . . . and then Mark was not allowed to have any counsel or any time to prepare for the trial even though he was told that he would have that," Magnone wrote in an e-mail.

Routman said the process wasn’t fair because it wasn’t administered as it would have been at the university, and she didn’t have an advocate. Their appeals were denied.

"Everyone we talked to is like, 'We don't understand,' " Routman said. "People would read [my paper] and get so scared. This looks just
like my paper."

Mark’s girlfriend, Nicole Scribner, wrote: "My paper was no different than Mark’s, and I received nothing but a slap on the wrist. Instead of getting a B, I got a C."

Routman said most students were not familiar with the University of Virginia’s honor code. "We’re all coming from completely different backgrounds," Routman said, "with completely different attitudes at our schools. To expect us to just pick up the honor code like that is ridiculous."

Gies said it’s not unlike any freshmen entering the university. Incoming students agree to abide by the code before registering for the trip, and everything is spelled out in a handbook. A student from the honor committee trains students at a required meeting. A university librarian also gives a presentation about referencing and citing sources, he said.

Routman’s parents paid for her trip home; Gruntz had to charge the nearly $1,700 for his last-minute plane ticket from Greece to California to his credit card. Neither knows how this will show up in their academic records when they apply to graduate school, but they know they will have to disclose it if asked whether they were ever found guilty of academic dishonesty.

"I really don’t think," Gruntz said, "I did anything wrong."

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