Unauthorized Collaboration
What Students Need to Know

Unauthorized Collaboration Defined

“Unauthorized Collaboration” means working with others without the specific permission of the instructor on assignments that will be submitted for a grade. This rule applies to in-class or take-home tests, papers, labs, or homework assignments. Students may not collaborate without faculty authorization.

What is Collaboration?
Collaboration means working with another or receiving assistance from someone (a classmate, friend, etc.) to complete graded course work. Collaboration can include:

- Jointly calculating homework problems
- Having another help one rewrite a paper
- Sharing sources for a take-home exam
- Working in a group on a lab assignment
- “Debugging” another’s computer program
- Checking homework answers with others

What are the Ground Rules?
If Collaboration is permitted, students must comply with the rules set by the instructor and course syllabus.

- You may not exceed limits set by your instructor, and may ONLY work together to the extent specified by the instructor.
- If unsure about the limits, seek permission before working with someone else.
- Even if your instructor permits collaboration, it is NEVER ethical to copy someone’s work or let them copy yours.
- If asked whether you worked with anyone on an assignment, ALWAYS tell the truth.

Example:
In a computer science class, students are allowed to discuss “general concepts,” but all code submitted must be “individual work.” Some students assume they can work in groups, since each of them helps write part of the code. Have they broken the rule against unauthorized collaboration?

Yes. “individual” means that students must work ALONE. Even though they didn’t copy, these students had nearly identical answers, including unique errors. “General concepts” are broad ideas rather than specific code, solutions, or answers.

Are the rules different from one course to the next?
Yes. Collaboration may be permitted in one class, and forbidden in another, because faculty have different teaching methods and goals. Some focus on important lessons learned from working individually, while others encourage students to solve problems together. Working alone builds students’ own individual skills, knowledge, and confidence and permits a more accurate evaluation of each student’s weaknesses and achievements. Collaboration, on the other hand, provides teamwork experience: students learn from answering each other’s questions, sharing strategies, and providing mutual encouragement. Students need BOTH experiences – working independently AND collaboratively – to prepare themselves for their chosen career fields.
Students may NOT ignore the rules of the course because they don’t like them, because think they learn more by working with others, or because they get frustrated when they can’t figure out the answer. And they can’t avoid responsibility by saying they never knew there was a rule against working together – ignorance is not a defense. Instructors may permit students to collaborate on SOME assignments, but NOT on others (for example the first two problem sets only). final write-up to be in the student’s own words. It may be okay for students to discuss general concepts of a homework task, but be required to calculate the final answer on their own. If you’re not sure where to draw the line – ASK!

Why Limit or Prohibit Collaboration?

• Unauthorized collaboration misrepresents joint work as the work of an individual.

• Unauthorized collaboration gives those who break the rules an unjust advantage and results in unfair competition.

• Those who always work with others may be unaware of gaps in their own knowledge and skills, and do not learn all they can or should from their assignments.

• Students are held accountable for understanding and following course rules— and for asking questions when unsure!

Example

Students perform a lab experiment with partners because the apparatus needs two operators. Partners may discuss the concepts involved in the experiment and the lab report format. Lab calculations and write-ups (procedures and equipment used, results, graphs, diagrams, and conclusions) must be completed by each student working alone, in the student’s own words.

Two students submit reports with different wording, but very similar ideas, and with all graphs and diagrams IDENTICAL (2 printouts of the same computer graphics). Have these students cheated?

Yes. Preparing graphs and writing up the report are important elements of the learning process, which each student was required to do alone. Even if neither copied, and they worked together only on the graphs, they still broke the rule.

Conclusion

Be advised — unauthorized collaboration CAN be detected. Some students who break the rules may “get away” with it this time – but next time they won’t. Students have a responsibility to report dishonesty; wrongdoing by another does not excuse a student’s violation. Unauthorized collaboration undermines the educational goals of the University. Students must understand course rules, and ask questions if standards are unclear. If you would like assistance regarding these issues, please contact the Dean of Student Life Office, (661) 654-6091. You can also view additional material on the web at www.csub.edu/studentconduct

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