



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?

The CSU Chico Student Code of Rights and Responsibilities presumes that all work submitted for a grade has been done by the student working alone, and that any sources or outside assistance have been acknowledged and cited. If collaboration is permitted, students must comply with the rules set by the instructor and course syllabus.

- You may not exceed the 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.

Example:

The faculty member prohibits all collaboration, and tells students not to discuss homework, solve problems together, or compare answers. During office hours a student asks about a pending homework question and the professor explains the problem. Seeing this, two students later work on the homework together. Have they violated the professor’s rule?

Yes. Authorized assistance provided during class, discussion section, or office hours by those who teach the course **DOES NOT** imply permission for students to work together on assignments. If the syllabus says collaboration is prohibited, then it is not OK.

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 they 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). Or they may permit students to work together on the early stages of a project or lab, but require the 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!

But OTHER students do it...

The number of students referred for unauthorized collaboration has been increasing. In 2004-05, 76 students were referred for this reason. Many said they did not know that they were breaking the rules (“I didn't copy, I worked with a group;” “I've seen other students doing homework together outside the classroom;” “I tried to solve the problems by myself and just checked my answers with a classmate.”). Remember, the instructor sets the standards, and students must comply with them.

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.

How can I know which rules apply?

- Read the syllabus, review the course website, and follow assignment instructions.
- If you're not sure, ask the instructor or call Student Judicial Affairs for help with understanding the rules.
- Don't guess or assume – if you're confused, others probably are too. You can help by raising the issue.
- When in doubt, remember that students should work alone unless they have permission to do otherwise.
- Students may consult tutors about pending work, as long as the tutor only identifies errors or demonstrates sample problems that are NOT part of the assignment. The tutor may not fix mistakes, re-write papers, or do homework for the student.
- Students may always study together for tests, and discuss concepts, readings, and notes to help them learn the material.

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 Office of Student Judicial Affairs, (530) 898-6897. You can also view additional material on the internet at www.csuchico.edu/sjd.