

Inappropriate collaboration on an assignment can occur in a number of different ways depending on the circumstances. These situations typically involve students working with others on an assignment, exam, or other course activity in a way that violates the assignment's guidelines or the instructor's expectations.

In instances like these, inappropriate collaboration can undermine the principles outlined in our LSA Community Expectations regarding Academic Integrity and harm not only those that collaborated, but the entire academic community in a variety of different ways. Consider the instructor who has spent countless hours working on material to better engage students with and help them grow academically or the other students in the course who have worked honestly to earn the results now undermined by an unfair advantage.

This disrespect is not just limited to those around you in the classroom. Choosing to inappropriately collaborate undermines your own growth and development leading to more long term consequences when you find yourself underprepared for future prospects.

The following are examples on inappropriate collaboration presented to the Office of Student Academic Affairs:

Example #1

A grader for a statistics course is reviewing the second homework assignment for a large lecture class. For this assignment, students completed a number of multiple choice, select all that apply, and short answer questions. To his surprise, he notices two students whose short answer responses appear to have extremely similar wording and he alerts the instructor for the course.

The instructor agrees with the grader's assessment and she reaches out to both students to discuss the similarities. In their initial meetings, the students indicate that they worked with another student, but that their answers were written independently. Both suggest that their answers may appear similar due to the nature of the course, as students are taught to analyze data in a particular method.

The instructor however remains skeptical. In part because both students' open ended free response questions have several instances of near identical phrasing, wording, and even order. In addition, out of a classroom of nearly 800 students' unique responses these were the only two that had these similarities. As a result, they submit their findings to the Office of Student Academic Affairs.

In the students' meetings with the Coordinator of Academic Integrity, both students acknowledged an error of judgment. They indicated that they worked together on the assignment, talking through their answers and problem sets over the phone. As a result, both students were issued a warning and a reprimand from the College.

What could the students have done differently?

1. **Understand Collaboration Guidelines:** In many cases, students are allowed to discuss problems and concepts with their peers in order to broaden their understanding. However, understanding when that type of collaboration is acceptable and when it is not is an important step. Oftentimes the syllabus, assignment prompt, or even the course canvas page outline approved forms of collaboration. Knowing where that information is could have prevented the confusion that occurred.
2. **Seek Instructor Guidance:** If students are unclear about the guidelines for collaboration as outlined in the course, they could seek out clarification from the instructor or the graduate student instructor. This proactive approach could have helped with any misunderstanding and prevented academic misconduct.
3. **Be Honest:** If these students had been honest about their confusion with the course policy and disclosed their collaboration initially instead of being dishonest, it may not have escalated to the Office of Student Academic Affairs.

Example #2

A sociology instructor is grading a take-home problem set. While reviewing the assignment submissions, she notices that five students have several identical answers, including several identical errors in their code.

The syllabus for the course indicates that *“All work must be done independently...Incorporating someone else’s work into your assignment in any form is a violation of academic integrity. This includes adapting solutions or partial work from any offering of this course or another. Enabling plagiarism or inappropriately collaborating by “sharing” your work is also prohibited. If you have any questions about these matters, please contact a course staff member. Violators will be referred to the Office of Student Academic Affairs.”* So the instructor submits all relevant materials to the Office of Student Academic Affairs.

In their meeting with the Academic Coordinator, all five students indicated that they worked in the same space together while completing the take-home assignment. They indicate confusion regarding the syllabus policy, pointing to another section entitled “Working with a Partner”. This section indicates, *“When working on the problem sets, you are allowed to discuss strategy with one another and to ask questions via Piazza, but all work should be done on your own-you are not allowed to share work with one another or work on them together.”*

Although the students sat in the same space, they indicated that each of their submitted assignments was their own. They did not actively work on the same assignment side by side, or share their screens with anyone else in that space. They did however discuss strategy and reached out with concerns or provided their strategy for answering a particular question to the group.

During this discussion, they discuss what the section “Working with a Partner” on the syllabus actually meant. The students accept responsibility for their actions and further discuss how to go about reaching out to their instructors when there is confusion about a course policy. The Coordinator issues a warning and reprimand to the students.

What could the students have done differently?

1. **Read and Understand the Syllabus:** In this instance the students had only partially read the syllabus, and not paid close enough attention to the policies as they were outlined. Referencing it would have helped them better understand the policy and ensured they wouldn't have worked with one another or in the same space.
2. **Ask Questions!** If students are unsure about course policies, reaching out to course staff members for further clarification is never a bad thing. It's always better to ask rather than assuming something.
3. **Encourage Responsible Academic Behavior in the Classroom:** We're all in this together as a community. If students have concerns about how to interpret a syllabus and course policies, they should raise them with the instructor so that everyone in the course has a better understanding of what is required. It also alerts the instructor to areas where there may be potential confusion and better help them address it in the future.