

Framework for the Assessment of Unauthorized Collaboration Involving Undergraduate Students

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Responsible/Originating Department:	Vice-President, Academic & Provost
Executive Contact:	Associate Vice-President, Academic
Related Policies, Guidelines & Procedures:	
Policy 71 – Student Discipline	
Policy 73 – Intellectual Property Rights	

1. General

Policy 71’s glossary defines *unauthorized co-operation or collaboration*, as “co-operation or collaboration with another student/other students in the completion of an academic assignment, in whole or in part, beyond what the instructor has indicated is acceptable; failure to follow the instructor’s directions regarding the level of group work that is permissible for a particular assignment.”

However, the University of Waterloo recognizes that collaboration is also a beneficial practice, both for students’ ability to learn within a course and as a practical skill for their later careers. This framework articulates guiding principles and criteria for distinguishing legitimate from unauthorized collaboration and, in the latter case, for assigning a penalty. For simplicity, we equate “co-operation” with “collaboration” in the remainder of this document.

2. Definitions and Examples

- i. Legitimate collaboration is defined as collaboration that is consistent with instructor guidelines. In the absence of explicit instructions, it is reasonable for students to discuss course concepts together, even if those concepts are directly related to a current assignment. However, unless specified by an instructor, students are not generally allowed to complete an assignment together (e.g., write a paper or develop code together).
- ii. Collaboration outside the parameters indicated by the instructor is referred to as *unauthorized* collaboration. The boundary between legitimate and unauthorized collaboration will depend on context, including the nature of the course, the assigned task, and the instructions given regarding the task (see Appendix A for examples). It is critical for instructors to be explicit – both in writing and verbally – about whether collaboration is allowed in their course, and if so, the extent to which it is allowed. It is also critical for students to understand the distinction between legitimate and unauthorized collaboration (Appendix B) and to be sure they understand what is allowed in a given course. Unless

specified explicitly, the general principle is that collaboration which results in submitted content that is the same or similar may be deemed inappropriate because it does not accurately reflect individual student understanding. Typically, the results of unauthorized collaboration will bear a similarity to plagiarism, with the essential difference being that in the former case the submissions are prepared by students working together whereas in the latter they have been obtained from an external source (or from their prior work in the case of self-plagiarism). In practice, it is not necessary for an Associate Dean (AD) to distinguish them given that the penalties here align with the framework of penalties for plagiarism.

- iii. In some instances, a student may give one of their assignments from a course to a student taking the same course in a later term. The latter student's submission of that assignment is an instance of unauthorized collaboration and both students will accordingly be subject to disciplinary action.
- iv. Unauthorized collaboration may incur penalties even if it is unintentional (e.g., students believe the degree of collaboration to have been appropriate, they have made no attempt at deception, and yet have produced work with shared content which could only have resulted from collaboration). However, if there is evidence that students have an intent to deceive their instructor to obtain credit for the same work, this should lead to an enhanced penalty for *collusion*.

3. Principles for the Assignment of Penalties

- i. Under Policy 71, the student's AD has the authority to assess instances of unauthorized collaboration in student submissions¹ and to assign the resultant penalties, based on the Suggested Penalties for Unauthorized Collaboration (see Appendix C). An instructor may propose a grade penalty to the AD when seeking an informal resolution; the AD shall determine whether or not it is appropriate.
- ii. If students have submitted original work yet there is evidence that they inappropriately collaborated, the students will be directed to campus resources that uphold the principles of proper scholarship (see Appendix B). Repeated offences may incur stiffer penalties.
- iii. The presence of shared content may not be the result of collaboration. Depending on the nature of the course element, there may be features that could realistically occur in more than one submission coincidentally (e.g., from a common experience with a tutor).
- iv. The severity of the penalty for unauthorized collaboration depends on the level of collaboration and the quantity of shared content submitted. Example

¹ "Submissions" refers to any work provided by a student in order to obtain credit in a course and includes (but is not limited to) essays, assignments, reports, proposals, lab reports, and presentations.

- 1: Students who collaborate during the writing of an essay, yet submit mostly original work, may receive a lighter penalty than students who submit identical essays. Example 2: Students who submit an identical section of a report may receive a lighter penalty than students who submit identical reports.
- v. In some instances, however, students may unduly collaborate (where explicitly prohibited) in the development of a strategy for approaching a problem, in the structure of a paper, or in the sharing of a reference list. In these instances, given that the content of the assignments differs, the Associate Dean may not be able to refer to the penalties in Appendix C because they focus on the amount of shared content. The Associate Dean will thus determine a penalty based on the extent to which the assignment is considered to be a collaborative result.
 - vi. The impact of an academic integrity violation on a student's mark depends on the value of the submission. As such, imposed penalties can vary from the recommendations in Appendix C in an effort to ensure that their impact is consistent with their objectives. Example 1: A penalty of a 100% reduction on an assignment worth 2% of a student's final course grade is not particularly impactful, so there may be an additional 5% reduction from the final course grade. Example 2: A penalty of a 50% reduction in the earned grade on an assignment worth 40% of the student's final course grade may result in a course failure, so the disciplinary decision may specify that the student's final mark on the assignment should not produce a failure in the course. Example 3: Appendix C suggests that an additional 5 mark deduction may be assessed for low value elements. However, it may still be appropriate to apply it to high value elements if the quantity of shared content approaches 100%.
 - vii. There may be instances where unauthorized collaboration is confined to a single section within a submission that includes multiple components (such as lab reports). If the marking rubric allows, the imposed penalty may be limited to that section of the submission; in such cases, the section penalty will normally be 100%.
 - viii. It may be difficult to assess the origin of unauthorized collaboration within group submissions. Instructors are encouraged to ask students to identify the portions of an assignment for which they are responsible. In the absence of this identification, all students may be held equally responsible for violations of academic integrity in the group submission.
 - ix. Associate Deans may consider extenuating circumstances in levying penalties that are less severe than the guidelines provided in Appendix C.
 - x. Consistent with University policy, repeat offenders shall receive more severe penalties.

Appendix A

Examples of Acceptable and Unauthorized Collaboration

Scenario	Acceptable	Unauthorized Collaboration (unless authorized) ²
The instructor tells students that they are not permitted to collaborate on a research assignment. A student is having trouble finding references.	The student consults their instructor or the Librarian for help.	The student copies a friend's reference list to write the research assignment.
The instructor tells students that they are not permitted to collaborate on a lab report.	The students do not work together at any point and submit original reports.	The students meet in the library and write sections of the lab report together, or collaborate through a social media site (e.g. a course Facebook group).
The instructor tells the students they are permitted to discuss course themes and concepts, but they must apply these concepts to the essay topic on their own.	The students meet to discuss challenging concepts, but write their essays independently using original ideas. If a student is having trouble applying concepts, they meet individually with their instructor for guidance.	The students meet to discuss challenging concepts, and as a group they brainstorm ways to apply these concepts to their essays.
A co-op student is preparing a cover letter, a work-term-related product (e.g., a website), or a work-term report, where it has been communicated that work is to be independent.	The student seeks advice from a manager or colleague, as appropriate, while completing the work on their own.	The student uses the material of another student or colleague in their cover letter, work product or work-term report.
A student forgets that a coding assignment is due until the evening before it is due.	The student cancels their plans that evening to complete the assignment, or takes a late submission penalty.	The student works with a friend to complete the coding assignment more quickly.
A student is having trouble with an assignment because they do not understand some of the course concepts.	They meet with a peer tutor for help understanding the concepts they find challenging.	The student asks someone who has taken the course in the past to use all or part of their assignment, or finds a previous report online.

² Note that these examples may not represent unauthorized collaboration; as described above, they are unauthorized only if they have been stipulated as such.

Appendix B

Achieving Academic Success

Students are strongly encouraged to consider the root cause(s) of unauthorized collaboration and to use one or more of the following resources, workshops and/or courses to learn how to avoid academic misconduct under Policy 71 – Student Discipline.




Note: The distinction between unauthorized collaboration and plagiarism is not always clear, so resources targeted at avoiding plagiarism have been included in this list.

HELP NEEDED:	HELP PROVIDED:
<p>Course-specific expectations Each instructor may have different expectations to define acceptable and unacceptable behaviours for collaborating on course work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult your course outline to understand what is allowable in a specific course • Ask your course instructor to clarify what is allowable. • Your course instructor or librarian may also be able to suggest alternative resources.
<p>Course-specific help Struggling with course concepts or content</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk or collaborate with a classmate, though be sure that you are working within the constraints set by your course instructor. • Connect with your TA or find a tutor who can help you better understand the course content on your own • See the list of campus-wide Course Specific Help or Tutor Connect • Your course instructor may also be able to suggest alternative resources to help build course-specific skills
<p>Writing skills Unsure how to write in own words or organize ideas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend a Writing and Communication Centre (WCC) workshop – e.g., “Turbo Charge Your Term Paper” • Review WCC writing resources • Use WriteOnline resources for writing case studies, reflective essays, literature reviews, and lab reports • Meet with a WCC writing specialist by booking an appointment or attending a drop-in session at the Library
<p>Stress and time management skills Struggling with workload stress, sufficient time for course work and/or how to approach large assignments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend Student Success Office workshops – e.g., “Get this term started” and “Organizing Your Time” • Review Student Success Office time management resources – e.g., “Backwards Planning” • Book Peer Success Coach appointment • Contact Counselling Services for individual appointments, workshops, or UW MATES peer support

<p>Referencing and research skills Unsure how to find good sources, cite sources and/or quote ideas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Library Find and Use Resources, subject guides, and Quick Start Guide • Review Citing Sources and use citation management software, like RefWorks, to track and format citations • Attend Library workshops– e.g., “Citing Properly with RefWorks” • Review Avoiding Plagiarism or How to Successfully Use the Works of Others • Contact a subject librarian or try Ask us for help
<p>Motivation and interest Not motivated about or interested in material; not seeing the relevance of material</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with an academic advisor • Attend a Centre for Career Action appointment drop-in time or workshop to understand relevance of course work • Consider connecting with upper year peers or your program’s student society to discuss your program and related future opportunities, courses, etc.
<p>Understanding unauthorized collaboration consequences Unsure of policies regarding unauthorized collaboration or its consequences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Office of Academic Integrity resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Introduction to Policy 71 ○ Academic integrity tutorial ○ 10 tips to avoid academic misconduct ○ Academic integrity fact sheet for students
<p>Writing courses Need practice writing, integrating research or learning how to collaboration in a supported and scaffolded setting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take a writing-intensive course: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ENGL 101B: Introduction to Rhetorical Studies ○ ENGL 109: Introduction to Academic Writing ○ EMLS 129/ENGL 129R: Written Academic English ○ ENGL 140R: The use of English 1 • Consider taking a course on effective collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ INTEG 210: Making Collaboration Work

Appendix C

Suggested Penalties for Unauthorized Collaboration

Level 1 Penalties³		
Unauthorized collaboration resulting in shared or similar content.		
1a. 1-2 lines or sentences of shared content 	1b. Up to 25% of course element 	1c. More than 25% of course element 
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 25% of earned grade deduction• Probation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 50% of earned grade deduction• Probation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 100% of earned grade deduction• Probation
An additional penalty up to 5% of the final grade may be implemented, in particular for offences occurring on low-valued course elements (i.e., elements worth less than 10% of a student's grade)		

³ Although there is only one level in these guidelines, this framework has been designed to parallel the one for plagiarism where there are additional levels.