Homework Collaboration in Mathematics: Guidelines for Students

Mathematics professors at Haverford often encourage collaboration on homework assignments. However, there is often confusion about exactly what this means, especially as it concerns your obligations under the Honor Code. The Department would like to clarify what professors in mathematics typically mean by "collaboration on homework" and give general guidelines about how you should interpret these instructions.

First of all, the primary purpose of allowing collaboration on homework is to facilitate the process whereby students learn from each other in a non-classroom setting. Mathematics is a highly social enterprise (contrary to popular belief), and learning works best if both students and teachers are actively engaged in the process of communicating about the material. Thus, study groups and visits to the MQC for assistance on homework problems play a valuable – even crucial – role in the learning experience for students in most math courses. The department wants to support and encourage these activities.

Nonetheless there are some dangers: if a student becomes an inactive participant and depends too heavily on the help of others, he/she may not learn the material adequately, and may eventually perform poorly on tests. Students need to take responsibility for this issue as mature learners, and insure that each collaboration is really helping them learn. In extreme cases when this breaks down, habits developed through inappropriate homework collaboration may escalate into a situation that requires Honor Council to intervene.

The Department would like to give some general guidelines about acceptable forms of collaboration. Individual professors may add or subtract from these guidelines, but this document outlines general principles that should apply in most situations. As with all situations involving the Honor Code, it is ultimately the student’s responsibility to seek clarification if any ambiguities remain.

Principles:

1) Any use of other peoples’ ideas or words should be acknowledged. Absence of acknowledgment constitutes your representation to us that the ideas and words are yours and yours alone. Failure to do this properly constitutes plagiarism.

2) If you collaborate on a homework problem, you are probably exchanging ideas, and you should acknowledge your collaboration. Most professors will ask you to make an annotation on each problem (since your collaborators may change from problem to problem). You should not hesitate to do this. We will not think less of you: remember that we have encouraged you to collaborate.

3) If you obtain material from a published source or the web, you should acknowledge the use of this material. Copying directly from such sources without attribution is as inappropriate as copying directly from another student’s paper. Some professors may restrict your use of outside materials, others may not; however, acknowledgment is required in every case.

4) If you collaborate on a homework problem, it may seem efficient to share your papers and submit essentially similar solutions. Resist this impulse! Do not share your papers! Most professors strictly forbid it. Once you have discussed and understood the solution, you and your partners should separately write up solutions. Some professors may (quite legitimately) ask you to do it in different rooms. We view this last step as an essential part of the learning experience.

5) Here is an obvious test: if you follow our guidelines correctly, your papers should not “look” the same. The papers should (of course) not be verbatim copies – direct copying is strictly forbidden. In addition, there should not be direct transcriptions of
information received orally. There should not be fragments of common text, repeated verbatim. There should not be overwhelming agreement in expository structure. Despite what some people might think, such similarities almost never occur when two students are writing their solutions up "at a distance".

6) Some additional effort may be required, after collaboration, to make the papers you submit "your own". **We are asking you to make this effort.** Again, we view it as an essential part of the learning experience.

7) **Substantial agreement between papers, verbatim or otherwise, will be construed as evidence of inappropriate collaboration.** In cases where deception does not seem to be the primary intent, professors will usually issue warnings initially. However, we expect all students eventually to acquire the skills we are outlining here. Repeated or flagrant violation will result in Honor Council action.

8) You should pay careful attention to any **additional guidelines** that professors may add to this list.

9) Finally, remember that **we want you to collaborate.** If you find these instructions ambiguous or difficult to interpret, don't hesitate to ask your professor for additional guidance.

* Paraphrased from the Haverford Honor Code.
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