

Abstract of the Honor Council
Case 27, Spring 2010
4/27/2010

Members Present:

Hilary Baker-Jennings (presiding), Andrew Patterson (clerk), Trey Burns, Kaleb Underwood, Kelsey Zottnick, Travis Smith, Erin Waller, Mike Matson, Adnan Poonawala, Gabriela Lopez (observing)

Ombuds: Lila Kerr

Letter of Accusation:

The Honor Council received a letter accusing Student A and Student B of collaborating on a pledged homework for an upper level engineering course.

Evidence Submitted:

- Letter of Accusation
- Student A's written statement
- Student B's written statement
- Course Syllabus
- Homework 7 prompt
- Student A's submission
- Student B's submission
- Deposition from instructor
- Emails between Student A and instructor
- Emails between Student B and instructor
- Student A's HW 6
- Student B's HW 6
- Sample Papers of HW 7

Plea:

Student A pled "not in violation."

Student B pled "not in violation."

Testimony:

The council began by questioning Student B. He claimed to be not in violation because he has not offered or received any help from Student A on the assignment in question. On one of the problems, Student B said that there is no evidence of collaboration, because the code is very different between his homework and Student A's homework. Student B said that he and Student A had gone to the instructor's office to ask him questions at about 10:00 a.m. on the day the homework was due (it was due at 5:00 p.m.). At 10:00 Student B had already completed part of 1b and 1c. He was having trouble with the problem, however, and asked the instructor for help while Student A was in the room. Student B brought the homework, and the instructor examined the homework and said there is a problem with the function used. The only time Student A and Student B spoke

together about that problem was with the instructor, who gave them help on 1b and 1c. Student B changed his answer based on the help from the professor.

Student B pointed out that the instructor had forgotten about this meeting, and this is why the instructor was confused in the deposition email. He might have forgotten that he shared information with them. Student B also said that he learned a lot about coding from Student A. He believes that this is why there are similarities in the code. He also states that many similarities could come from the instructions of the problem and the necessity of some elements of the answer. Student B said that at the time of this meeting, Student A had only done the very beginning of one of the problems they were discussing.

In the meeting with the instructor, Student B told the professor his detailed procedure for 1b and 1c, and the professor helped him. The information the professor gave him was necessary in getting the correct answer. Student B pointed out that on another problem there are many differences in the length of the two accused students' code. The extra length in Student A's code comes from plotting code.

When asked about the similarity in the spacing of the code, Student B states that MATLAB automatically spaces the ends and that he was more concerned about the structure of the code than the formatting. He let MATLAB do the formatting for him.

Student A then presented an opening statement and answered questions from the council. He had three reasons to explain the similarities between the two students' codes.

First, both students went to the office to ask about a final project, and at the end Student B asked a question. Student A joined the conversation, and at that time, he had completed up to the second part of problem 1b. Afterwards he went to his apartment and ran the code by himself. Secondly, the graph and the analysis of the graph is different from Student B's. Student A made a mistake in his answer that did not appear in Student B's answer.

He said that Student B asked him a lot about learning MATLAB. It is common for them to have similar coding style. Also, some of the code comes from MATLAB tools.

Student A then showed a video on his computer of how the MATLAB tools can help determine how coding is structured. Student A also got some ideas about how to structure code by listening to student B speaking with professor. Student A said that when he copied his code from MATLAB into Microsoft Word is altered the spacing somewhat.

When asked about notational differences in scientific notation between 2b and 1b, he uses two different notations because it is used that way in the question prompt. Student A then used MATLAB to show that the two notations accomplished the same thing.

Student B then re-entered the room. He stated that he submitted the assignment before the due time. He also printed from Word, but he is not sure if printing from Word altered the structure of the code.

In 1b and 1c there is not much variations in what they can choose because they need the loops. 1b and 1c are special. Other problems allowed for use of other measures to deal with them, but 1b and 1c are special in that there are only certain ways to solve it. He also consulted MATLAB How-To in solving. He reiterated that the two students had worked together on MATLAB in the past

Student A then made a closing statement. Student A mentioned again that he had helped teach Student B how to use MATLAB, and so they shared strategies and coding styles. He reiterated three points. The discussion with professor, the MATLAB teaching, and the MATLAB tools themselves could all account for the similarities in the code. Student A says that they completed the work separately.

Verdict Deliberations:

All members acknowledged that there were similarities in the code. The unusual tabbing in the for- and end-loops were left with no explanation. However, one student has the right answer and one student has the wrong answer, so collaboration is unlikely. Some members think that because 1b and 1c are so similar, there is no way they could be completed independently. In the coding of the other problems, their styles are very different. One has a compressed style and another has a very lengthy style. The similarities in these two parts is too much to be a coincidence.

Some members said that there is not clear and convincing evidence. There is some material that is strikingly similar, but the member does not know how to assess the students' explanations. The member was confused by their explanation for the differences in formatting the document. If the students were working together earlier and Student A taught the material to B, this would not be consistent with differences in other sections of the assignment. The professor also said that his information shouldn't affect how they did the problem while the students said that it would explain the similarities in their answers. There was uncertainty about how the nature of the question would influence the answers.

The accused students kept going back to same conversation with the professor to explain similarities, and some members feel this explanation is not strong. That being said, there is not clear and convincing evidence. There are important differences between the two accused students' answers to questions 1b and 1c.

Other sample student responses were also consulted, and similarities and differences discussed. Some of the other students' papers were similar in structure as well. However, this does not explain the similarity in the tabbing errors made by both students.

There is some consensus that members are unable to ascertain the nature of the similarities. A member notes that the use of one notation in some sections and a different one in others is also suspicious, but the explanation that they used the notation that appeared in the assignment prompt made sense.

Straw Poll #1: Is there clear and convincing evidence that a violation occurred?

Yes: 4

No: 5

Abstentions: 0

One member asks whether the differences can be explained and to what degree. Another member says that the direct similarities are too exact. He cannot figure out the story about who cheated off of whom and that by just looking at the similarities, there is no explanation.

A member notes that the students are trying to get to the same solution. They are also given directions on how to get there, but there are still several unexplained similarities.

Members pointed out that there are important differences between the two, and one of the students made a mistake that the other student did not. A member also pointed out that there are small differences, such as choice of values, that would not be present if they had worked together or one had copied off the other.

Straw Poll #2: Is there clear and convincing evidence that a violation occurred?

Yes: 3

No: 6

Abstentions: 0

Council members felt that further discussion would not change their decisions.

Straw Polls #1 and #2 made binding.

The Honor Council thus finds Student A and Student B “Not In Violation” of the Honor Code.

Time of testimony and deliberations: 2:31:47

Respectfully submitted,
Andrew Patterson
Clerk