

Abstract of the Honor Council
Case 38, Spring 2010
May 8, 2010

Members Present:

Hilary Baker-Jennings (Presiding), Andrew Briggs (Clerk), Trey Burns, Travis Smith
Kate Snyder, Darren Arquero, Kaleb Underwood, Erin Waller, Kelsey Zottnick

Ombuds:

Vivian Ban

Letter of Accusation:

The Honor Council received a letter accusing Student A and Student B of collaboration on a final paper for a graduate level music class.

Evidence Submitted:

- Letter of Accusation
- Student A's written statement
- Student B's written statement
- Course Syllabus
- Assignment Prompt
- Student A's paper w/professor's notes
- Student B's paper w/professor's notes
- Professor's statement
- Professor deposition
- Student A's original paper
- Student B's original paper
- Classmate depositions

Plea:

Student A pled "Not In Violation."

Student B pled "Not In Violation."

Testimony:

In their opening statements, both Student A and B admitted to working together while reviewing material pertinent to questions included in the paper prompt. However, both students claimed that they worked independently while writing their final papers. Student A also stated that the professor inconsistently permitted cooperation on assignments which created confusion among students.

While being questioned individually, Student A explained that the professor advocated discussion between students as a means of clarifying concepts introduced in class.

Student A said that she deemed it acceptable to collaborate with other students during the brainstorming process of her paper.

Student A stated that throughout the course she and Student B worked together during the brainstorming process for multiple assignments and papers, without any indication from the professor that their collaborative effort was in violation of the Honor Code. Student A suggested that the similarities in papers could be attributed to their long history of working together as well as the fact that they discussed many of the concepts presented in the class.

Student A said that in producing the paper in question, she and Student B felt confused during the brainstorming process. As a result, Student A consulted the professor to garner feedback on how she could refine the ideas that she and Student B generated cooperatively. Student A claimed that during her consultation, the professor introduced a technical idea relating to an article from which the accuser suggests a portion of her paper is directly copied. Student A said that until reading the letter of accusation, she had no prior knowledge of the article that the accuser says they used. She claimed that her understanding and inclusion of the technical idea in question was purely based on her discussion with the professor.

Student A also said that while the letter of accusation stated that the analysis of the music was highly subjective, Student A said that the professor seemed to imply that there was a correct answer for the analysis. It was more objective than the professor claimed.

Student A emphasized that similarities pointed out by the accuser were a product of her working with Student B to analyze the music, and that such collaboration was limited to the early stages of producing her paper and that their papers ultimately came to different conclusions.

Student A said that she and Student B worked very closely together when analyzing the music for the paper. She stated that some of the similarity in their work could be attributed to the objective nature of the analyses that were components of the paper.

Overall, Student A felt that it was permissible to collaborate on the research component of the paper. Additionally, she described the class policy regarding collaboration as inconsistent and ambiguous and claimed that it failed to specifically address collusion in the context of discussing concepts.

Student A was asked to address why she and Student B produced very similar interpretations of a concept in their paper. Student A said that their interpretations were similar to each other and unique relative to the rest of the class because initially they felt confused about the concept and thus Student A sought an explanation of the phrase from the professor, which she shared with Student B. Student A felt that sharing this information was permissible.

The council then questioned Student B individually.

Student B clarified that the extent of her collaboration was limited to analyzing the music with Student A. Student B reiterated that she wrote her paper independently, as she claimed to have always done in the past. Nonetheless, Student B said that she reviewed and interpreted information in tandem with Student A.

Student B referenced the opinions of a sample of students in the class, which said that the policy regarding collaboration was relatively inconsistent and unclear, particularly at the start of the course. Student B mentioned that the professor had explicitly permitted students to collaborate on several homework assignments, which she believed demonstrated inconsistency in his class policies with respect to collaboration. She also mentioned that neither she nor Student A had been approached by the professor in regards to a violation of class policy, despite having employed the same collaborative brainstorming process in producing their first papers.

Student B said that she did not directly consult the professor regarding concepts that she did not understand because she felt uncomfortable attending office hours. Student B confirmed that Student A shared information presented by the professor during her office hours.

Student B mentioned an incident where several students collaborated on a paper and turned in a single copy of the assignment that included all their names. She added that professor reacted by explicitly telling the class such action was a violation of his class policy. Student B said that she felt that this suggested that only joint submission of a paper was a violation of the Honor Code in the class.

In the letter of accusation, Student B was accused of copying the same technical idea as Student A from an article. Student B explained that her understanding of this idea came from discussion with Student A, which in turn was provided to her by the professor. Student B had never heard of the article before seeing the letter of accusation.

Student B said that she discussed a specific term with Student A and that the crux of her understanding of this concept was derived from discussion with Student A. Student B said at the time that she did not believe such discussion was a violation of the Honor Code. The accuser mentioned this term as a specific instance of collaboration, because he had invented the term and it was not yet published.

Council members then questioned Student A again. Student A stated that in brainstorming, she collaborated with Student B in terms of choosing which images to include in their papers, but they did not copy each other's images; they used the same online copy of the music.

Student A was given the opportunity to make a closing statement. Student A closed by reiterating her admission of collaboration, adding that she collaborated to a degree which she deemed was not in violation of the class policies outlined by the professor.

Student B then made a closing statement. Student B closed by highlighting the fact that she and Student A had been study partners since they were undergraduate students, and that they had never been accused of collaborating to a degree that violated class policy.

Verdict Deliberations:

The majority of Council members believed that there was clear and convincing evidence that a violation had occurred. Some Council members were unsure because class policy regarding collaboration was inconsistent and ambiguous, but other Council members did not think the policy was unclear.

Council members made specific reference to the syllabus which clearly states students are to work independently on papers. Additionally, Council members felt that the depth of collaborative discussion between Student A and Student B provided the foundation for both students' papers and thus strongly influenced the way each student chose to write their essay.

Honor Council members agreed that it was the students' responsibility to ask for clarification of class policies and the Honor Code if they felt the policy was inconsistent and ambiguous.

Overall, Council members felt there was clear and convincing evidence that a violation occurred.

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

Yes: 9
No: 0
Abstentions: 0

The Council then discussed whether Student A and Student B were "In Violation". Council members believed that they both were, because both Student A and Student B admitted to collaborating on the musical analysis for their paper.

Straw Poll #2: Is there clear and convincing evidence that Student A is "In Violation?"

Yes: 9
No: 0
Abstentions: 0

Straw Poll #3: Is there clear and convincing evidence that Student B is "In Violation?"

Yes: 9
No: 0
Abstentions: 0

Straw Polls #1, #2 and #3 were made binding.

Penalty Deliberations:

The council began by discussing an appropriate penalty for Student A.

Most Council members said they would mitigate based on Student A's level of cooperation. They felt Student A was very cooperative and provided evidence and testimony that was relevant to the case.

Some Council members believed that the inconsistency and ambiguity of the class policy regarding cooperation merited mitigation.

Some council members chose not to mitigate on the nature of the violation given the paper was worth a significant portion of the course grade and they felt that discussion between Student A and Student B provided the foundation for both students' papers and thus strongly influenced the way each student chose to write their essay.

The Council saw no reason to aggravate.

Straw Poll #4: What is the appropriate penalty for Student A?

F in the course and 2 semesters of suspension:	0
F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	0
F in the course:	1
3 letter grade reduction:	2
2 letter grade reduction:	3
1 letter grade reduction:	0
Letter of reprimand:	0
Abstentions:	3

While Council members mitigated based on cooperation and the nature of the violation, there were variations in the degree to which Council members mitigated with respect to the nature of the violation.

Straw Poll #5: What is the appropriate penalty for Student A?

F in the course:	1
3 letter grade reduction:	1
2 letter grade reduction:	6
1 letter grade reduction:	0
Letter of reprimand:	0
Abstentions:	1

The abstaining member said that they were not decided on how much to mitigate based on the ambiguity of the course policy.

Straw Poll #6: What is the appropriate penalty for Student A?

F in the course and 2 semesters of suspension:	0
F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	0
F in the course:	1
3 letter grade reduction:	0
2 letter grade reduction:	7
1 letter grade reduction:	1
Letter of reprimand:	0
Abstentions:	0

The council continued by discussing an appropriate penalty for Student B.

Council members felt the circumstances of the violation were the same for both Student A and Student B.

Straw Poll #7: What is the appropriate penalty for Student B?

F in the course:	1
3 letter grade reduction:	0
2 letter grade reduction:	7
1 letter grade reduction:	1
Letter of reprimand:	0
Abstentions:	0

Straw Polls #6 and #7 were made binding.

The Honor Council thus finds Student A and Student B “In Violation” of the Honor Code and recommends that each receive a 2 letter grade reduction in the course in question. A Prior Violation Flag is also attached to each of their records.

Time of testimony and deliberations: 2 hours 3 minutes.

Respectfully submitted,
Andrew Briggs
Clerk