

Academic Integrity in Computer Science at Ursinus College

The Computer Science faculty members at Ursinus College are careful to design projects and homework assignments that will help you get the most out of your studies. Plagiarism — representing someone else’s work as your own — undermines this goal. The issue of plagiarism in Computer Science education is a very important one that must be clear among students and faculty. The fact that Computer Science is particularly subject to plagiarism is evidenced by the fact that many CS departments have separate policies describing what does and does not constitute plagiarism.

The purpose of this handout is to help students understand what constitutes plagiarism in Computer Science, and to understand what is and is not acceptable. The next section of this document is in the form of a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). Although it is not possible to anticipate all possible situations that may arise about plagiarism in Computer Science, this is intended to help clarify the subject. Note that each professor may modify these policies depending on the particular course being taught or the structure of an assignment. If any situation should arise that is still unclear you should ask your professor for clarification.

Computer Science Plagiarism FAQ

1. Q: What is considered plagiarism in Computer Science?
A: Representing another’s work as your own. For example, receiving code from someone else or downloading code and copying it into your program.
2. Q: Many algorithms that we use have already been implemented by someone else. Why can’t we just use them instead of reinventing the wheel?
A: The ability to implement a new algorithm is one of the most important skills a student of Computer Science must learn. The best way to develop this skill is to implement simple algorithms and work up to more advanced algorithms over time.
3. Q: Is it ok to use another student’s code and give attribution?
A: No.
4. Q: Sometimes we are expected to work in groups. What do we do then?
A: Make it clear among your group members who is responsible for what. In general sharing code among members of the group is permitted. Check with your professor if this is unclear in any way.

5. Q: I have a deadline coming up tomorrow morning and I haven't started yet. What should I do?
A: Get as far as you can before the deadline and turn in what you have. This is far better than risking dismissal from school.
6. Q: My friend has the same program due as I do and is not going to be able to complete it on time. Can I share my code?
A: No. If you share your code you are in violation of the Academic Integrity Policy.
7. Q: Shouldn't I do everything in my power to turn in something that works rather than something broken, including using someone else's code?
A: No. You should get partial credit for an serious attempt at a solution. Again, turning in something that's broken is far better than risking dismissal from school.
8. Q: Am I ever able to discuss problems with other students?
A: Some kinds of problem discussion with other students is quite beneficial. In general you can discuss implementation options with other students, or seek debugging assistance after you have already spent a reasonable amount of time debugging yourself; however, it is NEVER acceptable to electronically send your code to another student (or receive code from another student). Debugging assistance should be provided in person.

Note that this may vary from class to class. When you are working on a group project it is necessary to share and comment on your code, so make certain the expectations from your professor are clear to you.
9. Q: If the professor provides us with code are we allowed to use it in our programs?
A: Almost always. If you are expected to not use it for some reason, the professor would indicate this.
10. Q: Is it ok to look for examples online that illustrate what we are trying to do?
A: It depends. Sometimes the documentation for a library call is incomplete, so it can be useful to just see how someone else has used it. As long as it does not substantially implement what you are expected to implement this may be acceptable. The best place to go first, though, is to your professor.
11. Q: How will violations the Academic Integrity Policy be determined?
A: If a violation is suspected, you will be asked detailed questions about your work. If you are unable to answer the questions you will be considered to be in violation.