

The Ethics of Scholarship: A Note to Skidmore Students

Dear Students:

These notes and reflections explore the ethics and protocols of academic endeavors at Skidmore. We hope that most of the observations seem commonplace because they are the common fabric of personal and intellectual integrity.

Trust: At the heart of a college education is a fundamental trust between students and their teachers and among the students themselves. An unwavering commitment to doing the best we can with our own intellectual resources and to respecting the academic help we receive from other students and scholars are the central tenets of our educational experience.

Ethics and Uncertainty: An unflinching commitment to honest struggle is inherent in the process of discovery. In pushing the frontiers of their knowledge and expanding their acquired skills, college students must expect to find many academic tasks as intellectually uncomfortable as they are interesting and rewarding. We need to embrace the challenges of serious inquiry in order to grow intellectually, not rush the process and avoid intellectual discomfort through easy, expedient, and sometimes dishonest strategies. Often the better work that creative thinkers produce not only presents hard-won conclusions but also explores and clarifies major questions still to be addressed.

The Learning Community: Another sign of student-scholars' intellectual strength is their ability to engage in a critical and appreciative dialogue with the findings of other students and scholars. The process of discovery is often interdependent and interdisciplinary. It often demands that we incorporate in our work, or challenge and modify, the information gathered and ideas propounded by other people. At what stage in your education you enter into this larger, exciting intellectual dialogue with the work of other scholars will depend in part on your own initiative and in part on the guidance supplied by individual instructors as they define the expectations of a particular assignment.

My Work, Their Work: Whenever our inquiries take us into the larger world of what others have thought and said, we must distinguish carefully between our own information and perspectives and the help we have received from other sources. The ability to perceive the precise dividing lines between our own ideas and words and the contributions of other people is not only an academic skill that students must exercise and refine. It is also the fundamental expectation of academic integrity. It is a sign of academic maturity and strength, not of weakness, to reveal exactly what you have contributed to a field of inquiry and what you have gained as a member of a larger community of scholars.

Collaborative Learning: With growing frequency, you will encounter academic work that is to be done collaboratively, and a cooperative approach to tasks is also becoming a significant aspect of many jobs and careers. Thus collaborative endeavors in the classroom, laboratory, and studio constitute an important part of a Skidmore education. But it is imperative in every such activity for you to recognize just where collaborative effort ends and where your own individual work must stand on its own merits. College instructors, and your fellow students, assume that everything you present as though it were your own—whether in spoken, written, digital, or visual form, whether for a grade or not—is truly and solely the result of your own efforts. If your work has benefited from the ideas, information, or words of other people and sources, it is your most serious responsibility as a student, colleague, and friend to acknowledge all partnerships in the learning process.

The Challenge of Interdisciplinary Learning: Much of your work in the contemporary liberal arts setting requires you to move from one academic discipline to another. This interplay among the disciplines raises the stakes further for the ethics of scholarship. Working among the various disciplines demands even more intellectual vigilance and agility because you must find out about each discipline's distinctive discovery processes and its protocols for handling resource materials. This challenge raises the most fundamental questions about how we explore an issue through the lens of particular disciplinary expectations and how we present what we have found.

When in Doubt, Ask: If you keep in mind that the intellectual processes and partnerships of the sort we are describing are complex and are mastered only through experience, you will not hesitate to ask a teacher or a faculty advisor when you are uncertain about the nature of an assignment, when you have reached the limits of collaborative work, when you should use primary and secondary sources, when you should rely solely on your own analytic abilities, and when and how you should document the influences upon your thinking. The asking is another part of your responsibility as a college student and is important to your educational growth. Most academic integrity problems can be avoided if you simply ask your teachers for clarification before submitting your work.

Some Practical Integrity Reminders

Be Informed: Remember that it is your responsibility to be fully informed about the requirements of the Honor Code. Claims of ignorance provide no defense when one is facing charges of violating Skidmore's academic code of conduct. Naïveté and good intentions cannot substitute for responsibility. Do not operate in a state of confusion and pay the price later.

Paraphrasing: It is not ethical to paraphrase material without fully acknowledging your source; putting someone else's thoughts, observations, or information into your own words does not make the material your own.

Plagiarism: When in doubt, document every source that has influenced your work. Seek your instructor's advice before turning in material that might need further citation of sources. Plagiarism includes copying, paraphrasing, or imitating another person's ideas, information, data, words, descriptions, choice of evidence, structure of argument, and so on. Material gleaned from Web sites is no more your own than material printed in a book or journal.

Unauthorized Collaboration: The most common faculty expectation is that everything you submit to an instructor with your name on it is entirely the result of your own labors, not the result of collaboration. If an instructor has allowed or even encouraged you to collaborate on some work for the course, be certain to check his or her expectations when you are preparing to turn in your work.

Exams Re-examined: While it is obvious that one cannot use notes, books, or other sources during an exam (unless given express permission by the instructor), you may not realize that any talking during an exam or other mode of communicating (including cell phones) constitutes a violation of the Honor Code and should result in immediate failure on the exam. The content of the conversation does not matter; the act of communicating violates the Honor Code.

For Further Information on the Ethics of Scholarship

- Consult with your teachers and faculty advisors
- Read appropriate sections of the Student Handbook
- Peruse the Skidmore Guide to Writing published by the Skidmore Expository Writing Program
- Consult with the staff of the Office of Academic Advising