

March 1, 2022

Friends,

As you know, we will have a take-home final exam in CS265/CME309. The policies for the exam were posted at the beginning of the quarter, so hopefully they are not a surprise, but we wanted to make an announcement explicitly addressing the exam policies, and in particular, our expectations of academic honesty.

The reason for this announcement is (1) mostly just to be clear and transparent, but also (2) because we've heard some horror stories recently surrounding honor code violations and take-home exams. We are pretty sure that (2) is specific to other classes (e.g., required, lower-level classes), and that it wouldn't happen in our class, but we figured it can't hurt to be direct about it.

Policies

The exam is:

- **Open book:** You can consult any static resource, including any course resources and anything on the internet, as long as you or your classmates did not actively cause it to be on the internet during the exam period. (See the non-collaboration policy below).
- **Untimed:** You can work on this exam for as long as you want starting from when it is posted until the due date.
- **Non-Collaborative and Non-Interactive:** You are not allowed to interact with anyone else (except the course staff) during the exam. In particular, you are not allowed to discuss the exams with your classmates, and you are not allowed to post anything about the exam online.

If you need to interact with the course staff during the exam (e.g., to ask a clarification question), you may post a **private** message on Ed.

There is a longer discussion about the Stanford honor code below. The short version is that **we take violations of the honor code seriously, and you should too**. If we notice evidence of unpermitted collaboration/interaction, we will report it to the Office of Community Standards. The honor code also asks you to do your part in seeing to it that others uphold the honor code: please let us (or OCS) know if you have evidence of honor code violations in this course.

Reasons for the Policies

Here are some of our reasons for the exam policies.

- Why a take-home, untimed exam?
 - We'd like to test your understanding of the material, not your ability to demonstrate that understanding under time pressure.
 - From a logistical point of view, many students are taking the class remotely/asynchronously, and having an in-person exam seems logistically infeasible.

- Why an open-book exam?
 - We are trying to test your understanding of the material, not your memorization of the material. If you already understand the material, great! If you gain some understanding by looking at the course materials or the internet while taking the exam, also great! In either case, you have understood the material.
 - Even if we wanted to make it closed-book (we don't), it's not allowed: the University's interpretation of the honor code does not permit closed-book take-home exams, as it creates undue temptation to violate the honor code.
- Why an uncollaborative, non-interactive exam?
 - We love collaboration! But at the end of the day we do need to assign meaningful grades specific to each student.
 - We recognize that different students have different opportunities to form collaborations and find teammates. As much as we love collaboration, we recognize that our "team homework" format can end up making it harder for those students who aren't in a position to collaborate as easily. Having the exam be non-collaborative levels the playing field.
- Why are you being such jerks about reporting violations of the policies?
 - We know that we don't need to be such jerks about it. You all will follow the rules just because it's the right thing to do, and we appreciate that. However, we also are considering the following game-theoretic analysis:
 - * If we were lax about reporting violations of the honor code, and all of you were too, then the strategic agent optimizing only their grade (as opposed to their moral standing) would rationally cheat: this could only make their grade higher, and there would be no consequence. Thus, everyone (who is optimizing their grade...) will cheat. We end up in a terrible equilibrium where grades mean nothing, everyone feels guilty, and Greg and Mary are very sad.
 - * On the other hand, if we are strict about enforcing the honor code, and if all of you are also, then the cost of cheating is very high. As per the OCS website, someone caught violating the honor code could fail the class, be suspended from the university, and do up to 40 hours of community service for a first violation. In the face of such penalties, no one will cheat: it's not worth it. We end up in the great equilibrium where we have meaningful grades, no one feels like they "have" to cheat to get ahead, and Greg and Mary are happy.

The Honor Code

Here is a statement of the Stanford Honor Code:

1. *The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:*
 - *that they will not give or receive aid in examinations;*

- *that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;*
 - *that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.*
2. *The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.*
 3. *While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.*

Part 1 has to do with the students' responsibilities. We expect you to uphold these, in particular not giving or receiving unpermitted aid, and also doing your part to hold others to the Honor Code.

Part 2 has to do with the faculty's responsibilities. We believe that our policies uphold these. In particular, there is university guidance¹ that non-collaborative but untimed and open-book take-home exams meet these standards.

Part 3 has to do with us all working together. We hope that this statement explaining the policies and why we have them is a good start. We are happy to answer any questions, and to hear any concerns and constructive suggestions!

Best,
Mary and Greg

¹See, e.g., <https://communitystandards.stanford.edu/policies-and-guidance/interpretations-honor-code>, <https://communitystandards.stanford.edu/resources/faculty-and-tas/exams-and-honor-code>.