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Are Honor Systems Doomed?

They are threatened by growing pressures for high grades, crowded exam rooms, and reluctance to 'rat' on fellow students

by Malcolm G. Scully

There is only one penalty for a violation of the honor code at the University of Virginia here: permanent expulsion from the university.

Honor violations are handled exclusively by an all-student honor committee, which holds hearings that are similar in many ways to a trial. A student who has been found guilty of cheating, lying, or stealing, has but one choice: leave the university.

The system has been in effect since 1842 and is one of this tradition-conscious university's most honored institutions. But, in the eyes of many students, faculty members, and administrators across the country, honor codes like Virginia's are anachronisms--relics of an era when higher education was reserved for an elite few who share common cultural and social values.

What some observers describe as a significant increase in cheating, especially at large universities, has forced many institutions that have honor codes to reappraise and in some cases abandon them in the past several years.

Accompanying the rise in cheating has been a growing reluctance on the part of students to police their own ranks by reporting incidents of cheating. Without such student participation, an honor system cannot work.

Thus, where once students began an exam by signing a pledge that they "would neither give nor receive aid on this examination," now they are being watched by proctors.

A Handful of Honor Codes

Today, honor codes that depend on students to identify and punish cheaters are limited to the military academies, a small number of private colleges and universities, and a handful of public institutions like the University of Virginia.

Students, faculty members, and administrators at Virginia say the honor code still works, primarily because students continue to accept the responsibility for enforcing it. Cases of cheating or stealing are rare on the campus. In an average year, about 30 students are accused by other students of cheating, lying, or stealing. About 10 are dismissed from the university.

Even so, the honor system here faces strains, not so much because of an outbreak of cheating, but because the procedures used to enforce it have been criticized for allegedly denying procedural safeguards to "single sanction" of dismissal has also come under fire.

The honor committee plans to conduct a survey of student opinion on the honor system this fall. In a previous survey, conducted three years ago, more than 80 per cent of the students said they supported the system.

Elsewhere, institutions report increasing unease about the effectiveness of their honor systems.

At the Johns Hopkins University, undergraduates voted last spring to abandon their 51-year-old honor system, primarily because they felt it was no longer effective in preventing cheating on the campus. A poll conducted by students last spring revealed that almost 30 per cent of all undergraduates had cheated in one way or another by the time they reached their senior year.

About 70 per cent of the students said they had seen cheating take place and had done nothing to stop it.

System Called a 'Farce'

Steven Muller, president of the university, commented: "It's been known for years that Hopkins is a very competitive school. For some time there have been allegations of pretty consistent cheating. People were saying the honor system was a farce, that it was a disgrace to call something an honor system which wasn't."

Students at Hopkins will vote this fall on an alternative system to prevent academic dishonesty.

Mr. Muller said that under the honor code, "students had been very reluctant to turn each other in. It was becoming such a severe problem they felt it would be better to have something that has more teeth in it."

The new system will provide specific procedures "to dissuade cheating on exams," he said. It will require alternate seating during exams and the establishment of explicit definitions of what constitutes plagiarism.

"As an educator, I very much regret this, but when something clearly isn't working, there is no sense in sticking with it," Mr. Muller said.

Mr. Muller said the undergraduates' decision could be viewed positively as well as negatively: they didn't think the honor system was preserving academic integrity, so they voted to develop a system that would.

The University of California at Davis--the only campus of that university with an honor system--also has found that its system has been ineffective for the past several years. A recent report by a faculty committee commented:

"The present status of the honor spirit has been variously characterized as a 'joke,' as 'shaky,' as 'a farce,' or as 'dead.'"

16 Per Cent Admit Cheating

The report indicating that 16 per cent of the students on the Davis campus admitted openly that they had cheated at one time or another. Among the reasons the report cited for the "erosion" of the honor system:

"A feeling of pressure to achieve high grades in a prescribed curriculum in order to be able to pursue some long-range objective later on."

"Large class sizes and crowded examination conditions." The report said the impersonality of such classes made cheating a "high-reward, low-risk activity."

"Inferior or unfair examinations. Multiple-choice and one-word answer tests were especially criticized."

"A reluctance to question or challenge the suspected misbehavior of another student, whether friend or not. An emphatic sense that students are on one side in an adversary relationship with the faculty."

The report from the committee also commented that students felt that "society at large seems to place little value on honesty."

As a result of the survey and general feelings that cheating has increased, especially in large, introductory classes, the university is re-evaluating its honor system.

Stanford University also has initiated a reappraisal of its honor system, in part because of increased concern about academic dishonesty.

Most cases of dishonesty are not "survival cases"--students who fear they will flunk out--but "compulsive students with straight A's frightened by the possibility of a B," said James W. Lyons, Stanford's dean of students. "It's rare for us to see a 'survival' case as we used to. But then I suppose 'survival' is a relative term. Maybe 'survival' is seen as getting into medical school, or into a particular graduate school."

At the University of Florida, the honor system is being re-examined in the wake of a cheating scandal in the school of business administration. As many as 50 students may be convicted of honor violations because of the scandal.

Virtually all observers agree that increased competition for places in graduate and professional schools and a sense of the pressure on students to "make it" have been major contributors to the

demise of honor systems on the campuses. The Johns Hopkins Magazine noted, for instance:

"Competition to get into professional schools has become so tight, and average grades up high, that many students seem to feel cheating is necessary to protect their futures."

'Thou Shalt Not Rat'

In addition, universities that have abandoned the honor codes usually say students are reluctant to "rat" on their friends by reporting cases of academic dishonesty.

The Rev. Michael Gannon, a professor of history and religion at the University of Florida, said he thought students had a "higher sense of personal honor" than in the past. But, he added, "if there's one moral principle universally observed here, it is 'Thou shalt not rat,' and this makes the older concept of the honor code ineffective."

NEWS BRIEFS

Circle and Beacon Walk

On September 14 the Circle walked for the first time this year. The new members are Kim Erlacher, Laura McSpadden, and Chris Herring. The members chosen last year are Lou White, president, Stephanie Born, Melinda Shepherd, and Cathy Deal, Secretary, Laura McSpadden was chosen as Treasurer.

The Beacon walked for their first time on October 9. The new members are Mary Rogers, Puddin Capel, Hunter Dortch, and Mabel Goehegan. The returning members are Mary Ashton Kollman-sperger, president, Anna Neal Blanchard, secretary, and Elizabeth Vann, treasurer. Congratulations to the new members of both groups!

Allison Watson

Seven New Cold Cuts Chosen

The seven original Cold Cuts inducted seven new members into their group on September 30, 1975. Approximately thirty girls tried out, and spent many long hours practicing and organizing their songs. The seven new members that were chosen are Susan Bridger, Tracy Fountain, Beth Justesen, Cindy Morris, Melinda Shepherd, Kate Taylor, and Lou White. Lots of luck to the new members.

Kathy Kinsey

Call Committee

The Call Committee is still hard at work. The latest development is that the committee has divided into two smaller committees headed by Kim Erlacher and

Mr. Muller characterized the situation at Johns Hopkins as one in which students "aren't willing to run the risk of being condemned by their peer group, while at the same time they want to preserve academic integrity."

Students Complain of Pressure

Although many students believe honor codes are ineffective, they do not condone dishonesty. Instead, they feel that mounting pressures on students--for high grades, for admission to graduate school, for success in an era of intense competition--are putting unbearable strains on systems that depend on students themselves for enforcement.

At a conference on honor codes held last spring at the University of Virginia, one student from the University of Michigan commented, "Pressures are destroying many campuses, and an honor system won't make any difference."

Marcia Nahikian. The committee, as a whole, narrowed the selection of "prospectives" down to approximately six men. The names were divided between the two smaller committees and it is now their job to visit these men. Each committee will bring their results back to the committee on their next meeting, November 12.

Phi Theta Kappa Inductions Held

On October 21, 1975, fourteen new members were inducted into the St. Mary's chapter of Phi Theta Kappa. A dinner was given in honor of the inductees at 6:00 PM. The inductions were held at 7:30 in the library. The new members are Betsy Armstrong, Jain Cassidy, Denise Fellos, Anne Heartt Gregory, Debbie Massey, Anne Mayo, Cindy Morris, Rogers Pender, Barksdale Spencer, Leslie Stoks, Gay Tolley, Kathy Tyndall, June Walker, and Jean Walston. Mr. Quinn is the faculty advisor for Phi Theta Kappa and Mary Pat Capehart is this year's president.

Kathy Kinsey

Rug Sale

The rug sale sponsored by the Flea Market Committee held in lower East Smedes on October 7 was a big success. The Flea Market Committee has been working hard all semester hoping to raise enough money to buy an econostat for East Smedes. They raised \$102 from the rug sale; however, they have many more projects in the making. One of these projects

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