

# ***FACULTY GRADE OPTION***

## ***TASK FORCE***

### **Task Force Members**

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Final Report Submitted: March 27, 1994

## ***Introduction***

The Faculty Grade Option Task Force was created by vote of the Honor Committee in the fall of 1993. The members of the Task Force were selected in late January. Over a six week period of time the Task Force drafted, distributed, and correlated results from a survey sent to all teaching faculty.<sup>1</sup> This survey consisted of 18 multiple choice questions and three free response questions. The survey itself can be found in Appendix A. This survey sought primarily to gauge faculty knowledge of the current grading option policy and and their sentiments with respect to its effectiveness and desirability. There were also questions about the Honor System generally. The survey also sought to identify the practices actually employed by the faculty with respect to their exercise of faculty grading autonomy. The survey had a secondary goal of education<sup>2</sup>; the letter directing the faculty to respond to the survey also included key points of factual information regarding the mechanics of the faculty grade operation as well as the Honor System generally.<sup>3</sup> The information that follows includes an interpretation of the data collected from the surveys and recommendations for the Honor Committee to take under advisement.

## ***Background***

The faculty grade option was an administrative agreement between the Honor Committee and the Faculty Senate originally adopted in the spring of 1980. While recognizing that both the faculty and the student body had the common goals of promoting

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<sup>1</sup> Due to a logistical problem, neither the Law School nor Darden faculty were surveyed.

<sup>2</sup> As education was not the primary goal, this report and its interpretive data do not, outside the very limited assessment of the awareness of the faculty of their grading autonomy, comment on previous educational efforts with the faculty, including the effect, if any, of the informative letter.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B.

personal integrity and academic excellence, the policy attempted to reconcile the need of the faculty to assess without interference the academic performance of a student with the commitment of the University of Virginia to the student-run Honor System. Tensions had resulted from the lack of clarity of enunciated policy in reference to the role honor trial verdicts were to play in the assignment of a student's grade. The relevant text of the proposal is as follows:

The Board of Visitors has granted solely to the students the authority to maintain a standard of student honor and ethical conduct. The Honor System is the students' mechanism for meeting this responsibility. The faculty recognizes the authority of the students, acting through the Honor System, to deal with matters of honor. Faculty members are expected not to use their own sanctions against dishonorable conduct as a substitute for an honor investigation when such an investigation is the appropriate action according to Honor System guidelines.

Similarly, the Honor Committee recognizes the authority of each faculty member over his own grading practices. The Honor Committee, therefore, recognizes that it should not attempt to control the grading practices of the faculty.<sup>4</sup>

Though a more succinct version of the above appears in the Faculty Handbook, the Handbook specifically states that the faculty is not to "use their own sanctions as a substitute for an honor investigation" while "the faculty ha[s] the right to assign grades, or take other appropriate academic measures, regardless of the outcome of an honor investigation."<sup>5</sup> The policy is quite clear in its theoretical division of obligations between the two parties. The proposal continues as University policy.

There is a second issue with regard to faculty conduct as it relates to the operation of the Honor System which the survey sought to evaluate. This issue centers around the point at

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<sup>4</sup> For complete text of the proposal, refer to "Faculty Grading Policy" adopted by the Honor Committee March 1980 and adopted by the Faculty Senate April 28, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Faculty Handbook, p. 44.

which, if ever, the faculty member should confront a student with suspicions of that student having committed an honor offense. The Faculty Handbook states the following:

A faculty member who suspects an honor offense has occurred should contact an honor advisor. It is the duty of the honor advisors to secure student investigators.<sup>6</sup> Once students have taken up the investigation, the faculty member will not be involved except to provide information. A faculty member should not contact a suspected student, as that would infringe upon the right of the student to make a retraction. (A conscientious retraction is a voluntary statement by a possible offender of the complete truth of a student's conduct made while the student is unaware of any investigation of said conduct.) Retraction has been employed right up to the time a student was accused of an honor offense and is considered a complete defense in an honor trial. (Emphasis in the original.)<sup>7</sup>

The Honor Committee was aware, however, that this policy was not strictly observed. As a result, the Task Force survey sought to understand what occurred in practice in relation to these guidelines and why this divergence occurred.

The foregoing information formed the basis of our survey. The Task Force's primary goal was to evaluate the relationship between theory and practice with respect to the issues of faculty grading autonomy and the point at which, if ever, the faculty should confront a student the faculty member suspects of having committed an honor offense.

## *Interpretation*

Of the approximately 800 surveys distributed, 155 were returned. It should be noted, if it is not obvious, that this survey was voluntary response survey and as such is susceptible to the inherent biases of such a survey. The reader of this report may weight this fact at will. This section will be categorized to reflect (1) interpretation of data with respect to the system generally; (2) assessment of the understanding and sentiments with regard to faculty grading

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<sup>6</sup> As is evident, this characterization is now obsolete. Advisors serve as investigators currently.  
<sup>7</sup> Faculty Handbook, p. 43.

autonomy; and, (3) an assessment of the interaction of theory and practice with respect to the policy on faculty confrontation of a student suspected of an honor offense.

### *RESPONSE TO THE HONOR SYSTEM GENERALLY*

The overall support for the Honor System was mixed with some degree of polarization. This result is not terribly surprising. Sentiment towards the single sanction evidenced this polarization, with 33% strongly supporting the sanction and 30% strongly opposing it. Forty-five percent offered some degree of support for the single sanction while 40% offered some degree of opposition.<sup>8</sup> Decisive majorities indicated that the Honor System does effectively build a community of trust and affects the way they administer teaching, assignments, and examinations. The survey results indicated a willingness of faculty to initiate honor investigations when they suspected cheating had occurred, and this tendency strengthened as the weight of the assignment increased. The survey results also indicated a faculty inclination toward support for a system that placed decision power in the hands of students, as opposed to one with intense faculty involvement.

Alternatively, the survey also indicated much frustration with the administration of the system. Much of this frustration appeared in the open response questions and was tied to specific experiences. Knowledge of those experiences were both from direct contact with the System or understandings acquired in second-hand fashion. It should be noted, however, that many of the named frustrations were based on concerns that may have been alleviated by the instigation of new procedures such as the new investigation procedure. Excerpts or comments which may prove enlightening, are as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> These percentages include the strongly in favor and strongly opposed percentages noted in the preceding sentence.

- ◆ Very negative [experience], the student was acquitted for reasons that made a mockery of the honor system.
- ◆ The honor system is what makes this university "different."
- ◆ [The system is] slow, inefficient, unjust.
- ◆ Because the standard of proof required for a guilty verdict is so high, it's a grand waste of time. My colleagues say "give a grade of zero and forget it."
- ◆ The Honor System is a silly joke played out by a bunch of pampered middle-class prima-donnas. I, and most faculty I know, pretty much ignore it - in general, the Honor System is run like a bunch of children playing "real world."
- ◆ Generally, with perhaps one exception, I have been very impressed with the students leading the Honor System.
- ◆ I was never informed of the results by the Honor Advisor assigned to the department or the case.
- ◆ Seriousness is irrelevant, having "honor" is like being a virgin, either you are or you aren't.
- ◆ Both my experiences with honor cases were so frustrating, I intend to ignore the Honor Committee from now on. As student juries are presently constituted, and with 80% requirement, it is next to impossible to obtain a conviction, regardless of the credibility of the case. The Honor System does not work.

As is evident from the comments above, though the faculty overwhelmingly support the fundamental tenets of the Honor System, there are problems that stem from administration of the system in some cases. For specific suggestions related to alleviating this problem, refer to the "Recommendations" section of the report.

#### *FACULTY RESPONSE WITH RESPECT TO GRADING AUTONOMY*

By far and away, this section lends itself to the clearest mandate from the faculty. Their responses indicate an unwillingness to entertain the possibility of delegating any aspect of their grading authority to any branch of the Honor System at any stage of either the investigation or trial procedure. On a theoretical level, it is clear that the compromise reached by the Honor Committee and Faculty Senate in 1980 still reflects the need to divide honor adjudication and grade assignment so as to insure continued faculty support of and participation in the Honor System.

On a theoretical level the faculty seem to recognize their authority in assigning grades. As was revealed by the multiple choice questions, 90% of the faculty surveyed were aware that the Board of Visitors recognizes the professor's ultimate discretion over the grade assigned in his or her class.

More than half of the respondents indicated that they would be less likely to bring potential honor offenses to the attention of the Honor Committee if they were compelled to accept the result of the honor investigation/trial when assigning grades. Two of the open-ended questions sought to illicit reactions specifically to this area of inquiry. One question asked for a specific comment on the relationship, if any, between faculty grading autonomy and faculty support of the Honor System. Seventy-nine percent of those who commented were unquestionably in favor of faculty grading autonomy.<sup>9</sup> In response specifically to the role a trial verdict should play in the professor's assignment of a grade, forty-eight percent of the respondents felt as though the trial verdict should play no role in the assignment of the grade. Conversely, twenty-five percent of the respondents felt like the assigned grade should be directly related to the verdict of the trial.<sup>10</sup> This sentiment is resoundingly reflected in the comments that follow:

- ◆ Absolutely no one should be able to tell me what grade to give a student!!
- ◆ I support the Honor System completely, I also understand and expect grading autonomy.
- ◆ If I were compelled to accept Honor Committee results for grading, given the Honor System's inability to convict under the single sanction, I would leave UVa for another academic institution.
- ◆ Faculty will not support a system that infringes on grading decisions.
- ◆ Grading autonomy is not negotiable to professors--it is our decision.

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<sup>9</sup> Though one individual read all of the responses to the question, the classification into broad categories still requires some discretion.

<sup>10</sup> The difference represents those who either gave no comment at all, a comment which was not applicable, or a comment which could not be fairly classified as representing one of the two categories.

Taking into account both the results from the multiple choice questions as well as the open-ended questions, the faculty both recognize and utilize and their discretion in assigning grades. There is little or no indication that they would be willing to cede any grading autonomy.

*ASSESSMENT OF STATUS, BOTH CURRENT AND DESIRED, OF FACULTY  
CONFRONTATION OPTION*

Though the Faculty Handbook outlines the desired procedure for faculty members when they feel an honor offense has been committed, this procedure, in practice, is largely ignored. The recommended procedure instructs faculty to refer a case immediately to and Honor Advisor and *notto* confront the student so as not infringe upon the student's ability to submit a conscientious retraction in good faith. In practice, the overwhelming majority of respondents confront students either immediately upon suspicion or prior to referring the case to the Honor Committee. A variety of reasons were noted for this which cannot be readily categorized. These included, but were not limited to the following: attempts to deal with "minor" offenses, the handling of ungraded assignments, or desire to confirm/deny "weak" suspicions.

The following are comments made by the respondents which are indicative of the sentiment relayed:

- ◆ I intend to confront students myself and ignore the Honor System. I have wasted a great deal of time on honor cases and do not intend to repeat the error.
- ◆ Confront as soon as he/she becomes aware of the problem.
- ◆ Confront only when there is clear reason to expect a violation.
- ◆ Normally I do not confront a student, especially as it compromises the retraction clause.
- ◆ Confront immediately.

The above demonstrates that there is a discrepancy among what is expected and enunciated as policy and what occurs in practice. Please see the "Recommendations" section for comments on how to handle this discrepancy.

## ***Recommendations***

- (1) Though in principle the faculty grading autonomy seems to infringe upon the integrity of the Honor System, in practice it is our unqualified recommendation that the Honor Committee continue to recognize the faculty grading option without equivocation. Faculty support and participation in the Honor System is imperative for the System's effective operation, which would likely disappear if the faculty's autonomy in assigning grades was sacrificed.
- (2) The Honor Committee should familiarize itself with the process for academic grievances as outlined in the University Record.
- (3) It is imperative, as has been recognized by the University administration, that the Honor Committee explicitly delineate the Faculty Grading Option in the University Record and other Honor Committee materials.
- (4) The Honor Committee in its education programs for the faculty should emphasize the faculty grading option as well as the recent changes in the Honor System which have attempted to respond to the faculty's other concerns.
- (5) Recognizing that the faculty have justifiable reasons for confronting the suspected student in some circumstances, which are to be balanced against the desire to provide students with the opportunity to make "good faith" conscientious retractions, the Honor Committee, or some part thereof, should dedicate the necessary amount of attention to provide specific guidelines (non-binding) to the faculty as instructional measures for when confronting a suspected student may be appropriate so as to best balance the competing interests.



10. ... on a quiz. {6% did not respond}  
 A. Yes 70% B. No 24%
11. ... on a mid-term. {3% did not respond}  
 A. Yes 87% B. No 10%
12. ... on a final exam/paper/project. {3% did not respond}  
 A. Yes 87% B. No 10%
13. A fourth-year who majors in Physics and Mathematics with a GPA of 3.7 is found guilty of a non-academic violation. The department should support her expulsion. **We disregarded the data generated by this question due to apparent confusion on the part of the respondents.**
14. As a variation of the situation above, the student cheated in a 100 level class that is not in either of her majors. The department should support her expulsion. **We disregarded the data generated by this question due to apparent confusion on the part of the respondents.**
15. A faculty member should turn over all possible honor offenses, so that the seriousness of a student's actions will be evaluated by the student's peers.  
 A=35% B=24% C=16% D=8% E=17%
16. A system that left the administration of grading as well as of expulsion to the faculty members would be worse than the current system.  
 A=46% B=17% C=19% D=8% E=8%
17. Because of the single sanction Honor System, less cheating (and other honor offenses) occur at Virginia than at comparable institutions. {2% did not respond}  
 A=27% B=23% C=25% D=8% E=15%
18. If I were compelled to accept the result of an honor investigation when assigning grades to students I feel have cheated in my class, I would be less likely to turn alleged offenders over to the Honor Committee. {5% did not respond}  
 A=35% B=18% C=16% D=13% E=13%

Please comment on the relationship between faculty grading autonomy and faculty support of the Honor System.

**When do you think a professor should confront a student he or she suspects of having committed an honor offense? Should there be guidelines given to professors or should it be handled on a case by case basis?**

**What role do you believe the trial verdict should play in a professor's assignment of a grade for a student suspected of an honor offense?**

## Appendix B

Dear Faculty Member:

We hope you will take time out of your very busy schedule to give attention to the matter we bring before you. The Honor Committee formed a Faculty Grade Option Task Force to examine the current theoretical basis and practical implementation of the faculty grading option. Further, we sincerely hope that this letter and survey will be a tool to educate and spark debate which will lead to dialogue that will benefit the whole community.

Enclosed you will find a "Faculty Grade Option Task Force Questionnaire" and a scantron sheet. There are directions on the questionnaire to aid you in filling it out. Both the questionnaire and the scantron should be returned via **messenger mail** to the Honor Committee office in the envelope provided by **Wednesday, February 23, 1994**. It is not necessary for you to place your name on the questionnaire or scantron. As with any survey, the accuracy of the results are dependent upon the strength and honesty of response. We will be evaluating these surveys and presenting our findings to the Honor Committee on Sunday, March 6, 1994.

*Did you know...*

➤The current policy has been in effect since 1980 and separates the responsibility of the Honor System to assess a student's conduct on an ethical level and the prerogative of the faculty member to evaluate a student's performance on an academic level.

➤Effectively, this means that a faculty member has complete autonomy (only constrained by departmental policy) in the assignment of grades or the imposition of academic requirements, such as re-taking an exam or re-writing a paper.

➤By policy as outlined in the Faculty Handbook, a professor is to contact an Honor Advisor when he or she suspects that a student has committed an honor offense. The handbook further instructs that the professor should **not** confront the student so as not to infringe on his or her ability to make a good-faith conscientious retraction. This policy has not been strictly adhered to. The purpose of this comment is simply informative and to elicit a response, which is specifically requested on the survey. The advantage of the policy outlined in the handbook is that it does insure the maximum amount of time for a student to submit a valid conscientious retraction. Some professors, however, elect to confront the student immediately to try to clarify the events in question so as to prevent an unnecessary investigation or insure the integrity of information gathered.

Thank you once again for your time and attention to this matter. We hope this survey has been as beneficial to you as your response will be to the Task Force. If you have any questions or additional comments, feel free to contact Tom Hayslett or Paige Lester, co-chairs of the Task Force, at the Honor Office at 924-3452.

{Note that this was sent on Honor Committee letterhead.}