

College of Arts and Sciences

Statement of Faculty Perspectives on Honor

April 19, 2004

Introduction

Out of concern for the health of the Honor System at the University of Virginia and the Community of Trust underlying it, the Steering Committee of the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences appointed an ad-hoc committee to define faculty perspectives on the honor system. This is that committee's report. We, the committee, hope to persuade the entire University community to work together to reinvigorate and strengthen an Honor System that we see now as enfeebled and barely functional.

Our statement analyzes shortfalls in the current Honor System and proposes student, administrative and faculty action to find remedies. We anticipate that our proposals will be controversial, that they will not only provoke discussion but will also clarify how distressed we the Faculty have become about the vitality of the Honor System.

Distressed though we are, we know too that our concerns are widely shared by both faculty and students. There is in our Community substantial energy for reform. We hope our statement will help mobilize and direct that energy.

Our statement has four parts. *First*, we articulate our common aspiration to keep alive the **Community of Trust** between students and faculty. *Second*, we show that UVa's Honor System is now overwhelmingly **faculty dependent**: demonstrably, without faculty involvement, the Honor System would be hollow at its core. *Third*, we offer our considered evaluation of the sources of both faculty and student "**honor fatigue**" – their withdrawal from participation in the current Honor System. *Fourth* and most important, we issue our **recommendations**.

As faculty, we stand ready to help resuscitate the Honor System, but we appreciate that only the students themselves can fix a student-run system. To encourage them toward that end, we believe faculty should consider declining to initiate new Honor cases until the students repair their system.

I. Our Common Aspiration: The Community of Trust

The University students who envisioned a Community of Trust over 160 years ago conferred a noble gift upon future generations: a student body that, through self-governance and self-reflection, would demand of its members the highest ethical behavior.

When the students promised to be responsible for one another and to ensure ethical action from every one, the faculty responded to the students with a grant of respect. Faculty would thenceforth take students at their word, give them broad freedom

and flexibility in coursework, and focus principally on education, rather than on monitoring academic integrity.

And so a deal was struck, and each party gave the other a great prize. The compact thus formed made today's "Honor System." Generations later, the Honor System still elevates life at the University and transforms the relationship between students and faculty. Upholding the tenets of the Honor System, students and faculty demonstrate their trustworthiness and respect and thereby continually remake and reinvigorate the Community of Trust. The Community of Trust is the Honor System's crown jewel.

A. Creating the Community of Trust through the Honor System

The Community of Trust is, in principle and by design, created and upheld by the Honor System. We see three elements of the Honor System as fundamental to establishing the Community of Trust "on the ground" – in practice:

- Students run the system, which enables them to demonstrate self-governance, self-reflection, and trustworthiness
- Students demand spotlessly ethical behavior from themselves and tolerate no ethical shortfalls from peers
- Students abide by a single-sanction rule, because they tolerate no ethical lapses from themselves or each other.

Each of these provisions sets a very high standard, but these standards are the pillars of the Community of Trust. When implemented, they establish this Community. When they are evaded – perhaps because they are too high to meet consistently or frequently – this evasion undermines the Community, a point we elaborate in detail below.

B. The benefits of the Community of Trust

Keeping the Community of Trust alive substantially benefits both faculty and students. When the Community of Trust is secure:

- Faculty are relieved of the duty of supervisory vigilance and can concentrate on pedagogy and ideas
- Students and faculty can flexibly accommodate each other and take each other at their word
- Students and faculty are both uplifted through the practice of honorable behavior.

This last point is perhaps most important. Theorists since Aristotle have placed habit at the center of moral education: honorable behavior builds honorable people, and a community of honorable people creates an inspiring university. Jefferson himself wrote

that the moral sense “may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body” (Letter to Peter Carr, 1787).

II. The view from the trenches: students opting out of a faculty-driven System

The Honor System articulates admirable goals, and the Community of Trust, when secure, is invaluable. In recent practice, however, we observe many serious shortfalls in the implementation of the Honor System. A central problem in our view is the fact that the Honor System is now only partially student-run at best.

To be sure, the Honor Committee and the Honor Trials are entirely student-run. Yet faculty members have come to play crucial – and quite unappealing – roles as police and detectives. Consider that in the most recent Honor Committee term faculty initiated 83% of all Honor cases (63% faculty, 20% TA's). As long as students rarely initiate Honor cases, the system must enlist very high rates of cooperation from the faculty to survive. Yet the general mood among the faculty is one of distrust, despair, and even at times disgust.

Though we file most of the cases the Honor Committee considers, faculty members initiate very few cases compared to the number of violations we observe. Instead, we pursue only the most airtight cases, with the clearest evidence. Infractions that are difficult to substantiate – such as one student looking at another student’s paper – are ignored.

Even when we do as the Honor System asks us and come forward with strong and seemingly ironclad proof – for example identically worded papers or papers found on the Internet – we must expect, given statistical patterns, that students will, in three out of every four cases, be acquitted or otherwise excused. Over the past 5 years, only 24% of honor cases ended with conviction or with the student leaving admitting guilt (excluding the cases brought by Prof. Bloomfield).

To say the least, our faith in the Honor System is not robust. Yet we are the System’s most important defenders. We believe that it is important that students, who depend so heavily upon us to make the Honor System work in practice, appreciate the problems we see:

- The Honor System is time-consuming, cumbersome, and often does not produce a just outcome
- The Administration provides us with little or no moral support and even has treated some of us as the “guilty party”
- The “single sanction” is so severe that it makes education and redemption of cheaters impossible
- The students – who are reluctant to report cheating, who rarely convict their peers who cheat, and who tolerate a “culture of cheating” (for example, the

manner in which “Poodah” files are often used) – do not themselves value the Honor System.

Faculty members are cynical about Honor, but the striking reluctance of students to initiate cases in their own ostensibly student-run System suggests that they are too. Why?

III. Causes of disengagement or “Honor fatigue”

Social psychologists have long studied when and why people fail to do the right thing, and their findings are highly applicable to the decisions students make to cheat, and the decisions students and faculty make to tolerate cheating.

A. *The power of situations*

People naively think that bad behavior is caused by bad character, and that the single sanction weeds out the few dishonorable students. But honorable behavior is more a product of situational forces than an expression of inner character. Cheating causes more cheating, especially within networks of friends, while strongly expressed and enacted norms against cheating dissuade people from cheating.

B. *The certainty of punishment*

People and animals are much more influenced by the likelihood of punishment than by its severity. The death penalty, rarely enforced, has no deterrent effect, while a 50% chance of a speeding ticket produces 100% compliance with speed limits. At present the single sanction is an academic death penalty, rarely enforced. And at present, the Honor System issues no academic speeding tickets.

C. *Disgust makes people disengage*

Toleration of cheating by students – manifest in low initiation and high acquittal rates – triggers feelings of disgust in the faculty. Thus, many faculty members choose to fail the work of cheaters rather than to get involved with the Honor System. Disgusted students may similarly “opt out” and rely on their teachers to deal with the cheaters.

D. *The principle of justice*

One of the deepest and most universal principles of human moral systems is the principle of justice, stated abstractly as “Treat like cases alike, different cases differently.” Yet the current Honor System treats unlike cases alike (since all infractions are subject to a single sanction) and like cases differently (since the overwhelming majority of cheaters evade the Honor System, and most of the rest are acquitted or excused upon psychological evaluation).

Since the single sanction is not perceived to be just, faculty and students are reluctant to file charges, and student juries are reluctant to convict. Cheating is therefore widely tolerated, and norms about cheating become unclear. The single sanction also motivates accused students to behave dishonorably at trial, rather than admitting their

guilt, leading to widely shared horror stories about egregious, yet unpunished, violations. This increases the sense of disgust and the probability of disengagement among students and faculty alike.

Given these social psychological realities, we conclude that the “single sanction,” one of the pillars of the Honor System, may in fact be an obstacle to honorable behavior. It may actually undermine the Community of Trust.

IV. What can students do to take back the Honor System and the Community of Trust?

Clearly, to recover the Community of Trust that we all value, students, faculty and the institution itself must act together. But because student self-governance is the core of the Honor System, students must take the lead. We respectfully offer these suggestions to students:

A. Supplement the “single sanction” with a forgiveness clause

The “single sanction” reflects a compelling Kantian logic. Even a single act of cheating that seems to hurt no one cannot be tolerated because if such acts became widespread, the Community of Trust would be undermined. Yet this philosophical foundation is fully consistent with adding a “forgiveness clause” to the single sanction. Forgiveness is a virtue, and if this virtue were to become widespread it would augment, not undermine the community of trust. Forgiveness would not replace non-toleration. Convicted cheaters would still be expelled from the University of Virginia. Yet considering the possibility of forgiving cheaters at some point might help build the Community of Trust by reducing:

- “opting out” of the system by students and faculty, by offering some hope for redemption rather than “certain death”
- dishonorable behavior at trial, since students who might ultimately be forgiven might also be less likely to resort to desperate measures like lying and legal maneuverings, and more likely to step forward and assume responsibility.

A possible adjustment to the Honor Code might provide that students expelled from the University on a first Honor offense may apply for readmission after a period of two full semesters, following formal recognition of error and demonstrated promise to uphold the Honor System in the future.

B. Make toleration of cheating a “judicial violation”

When students tolerate cheating, they fail in their duty to uphold the Honor System and they undermine the Community of Trust. Shouldn’t such misconduct encounter some negative sanction? The University’s student-run judicial system provides a mechanism that would reinforce the Honor System while appealing to students’ intuitive sense of ethics.

For the Honor System to work, students who become aware of cheating must confront cheaters, even if they will not initiate a full-scale Honor investigation. At a minimum, they must notify the professor that cheating has occurred, even if this is done anonymously.

Clearly, the norm of non-toleration must be resuscitated: in too many cases, a culture of tolerating and even encouraging cheating has developed, as the evidence of Prof. Bloomfield's courses attests. Students, who are more likely than faculty to know when cheating occurs, can attack the culture of cheating by insisting that failing to confront cheaters, or at a minimum to report the cheating that they witness, is a judicial violation.

C. *Publicize Honor casualties (and rehabilitation)*

Our community is not simply a collection of isolated individuals, but instead is constituted by members working together to form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Injuries to this body must not go unremarked, since a healthy community reinforces itself and its traditions through focus on collective events, both good and bad, publicly marking both its triumphs and defeats. To this end, we suggest that the Community of Trust

- mourn the dismissal of a member publicly by lowering a flag to half mast
- celebrate the forgiveness of a member by ringing a bell.

D. *Underscore the tradition of the Community of Trust through alumni*

Those students most knowledgeable about the Honor System leave at their graduation, but they remain members of the Community of Trust. Alumni seem to us important and under-utilized defenders of this Community. Through the traditions they value and the practical knowledge they possess, alumni could provide substantial guidance. This pool of "wise men and women" could be tapped on a regular and formal basis to consult with and advise current students about the Honor System.

E. *Improve support for faculty filing complaints*

Upon reform, we hope that faculty will no longer be the Honor System's main defenders, but we will be important participants. Students can help make our task of dealing with the Honor System less overwhelming by identifying a pool of volunteer faculty members as advisors to be on call to assist and advise faculty bringing honor charges and to act as liaisons between them and the Honor System.

F. *Clearly name exceptions to the proscription on lying, cheating, and stealing*

Historically, students have at some junctures turned a blind eye to certain forms of lying, cheating, and stealing. If the students feel genuinely that these behaviors are not Honor violations, then they should say so openly and explicitly. Students may want to consider clarifying the ethical status of behavior such as:

- Lying about one's age to obtain liquor (i.e. preparing false IDs)
- Deceiving another to obtain a sexual favor or violating another student's privacy or bodily integrity (i.e. seduction or date rape)
- Maintaining and using private "Poodah files" of past coursework not to study but to complete assignments.

We believe that saying clearly what is and what is not an Honor violation is fundamental to the definition of ethical behavior and therefore to the creation of the Community of Trust.

V. What can the Institution do to help students recover the Honor System?

While the University of Virginia, through its Board of Visitors, has delegated oversight of student ethical conduct to the students themselves, it of course retains an abiding interest in academic integrity. The University is, after all, founded primarily around its academic mission. It is crucial, therefore, that the University never appear indifferent to academic integrity, and especially that it act definitively to counter any misperception regarding the strength of its commitment. To this end, the University should:

- Speak openly and often about the core value of academic integrity
- Recognize faculty as key players in upholding the Honor System.

Most faculty members who initiate Honor cases believe that they are doing what the University expects. They employ a University-sanctioned mechanism to maintain academic integrity in their own classrooms rather than acting independently. When we participate in the Honor System, we help reinforce the Honor System: we make it work.

Yet when we act as the University expects, it leaves us bereft. The stated position of the University is to view faculty initiators as independent agents in disputes between two private individuals: the initiator and the investigated student. When the University formally admits awareness of an Honor investigation, it nevertheless shows no interest publicly and maintains "radio silence" with everyone involved, including the faculty initiator. In effect, the University views initiating an Honor investigation as something that faculty members do on their own, unrelated to their employment by the University.

Such distancing may provide the University with some safe legal harbor. But it leaves faculty initiators as lone individuals, discrediting their contributions both to the maintenance of academic integrity in general and the University of Virginia's Honor System in particular. This distancing is neither neutral nor innocuous. When community members act to sustain the Honor System, and especially when faculty members act to uphold academic integrity (a core scholarly value, after all) the University must not set them afloat but instead should support them.

VI. Faculty action strongly encouraged

Students must take back responsibility for the functioning and enforcement of their Honor System, and the Faculty of the University of Virginia should guide and encourage them. When the students reform and recover the Honor System, we will stand behind them. Until they do, our considered opinion is that we should defer our participation in the Honor System. Thus, we articulate both *post-reform* and *pre-reform* actions for faculty:

A. *After reform, support the Honor System in classes by*

- Talking about the Honor System on the first day of class
- Finding a student volunteer to be the honor representative in each class.

Public discussion of the Honor System in classes makes an explicit, collective re-commitment to honorable behavior and reinforces the Community of Trust. Similarly, making a student an honor representative reminds that students, not faculty, must be the core defenders of the Honor System. The student representative should be the conduit for all honor complaints, including those from faculty. While this arrangement may be most practical in large classes, it should be considered for every class.

B. *Barring reform, an Honor Strike*

In Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*, the women of Athens, fed up with the Peloponnesian War, go on a sex strike to force their husbands to vote for peace with Sparta. We hope the students will reform the Honor System soon. But if they do not, we believe that the Faculty should be prepared to undertake an **Honor Strike** to prompt them to do so.

An Honor Strike would clarify to students and the University how deep and widespread is faculty discontent with an Honor System that has devolved to a faculty-policed system where far too much dishonorable behavior is tolerated. It would end when students vote to take back responsibility for their Honor System, whether by implementing some of what we recommend here or by issuing reforms they articulate themselves. In practice, faculty on strike would

- defer from initiating honor cases, unless the students vote to make changes enabling them to take back full responsibility for maintaining honor
- fully cooperate with the student-run Honor System by serving as witnesses in any student-initiated cases
- simply give grades of F or 0 on assignments in which cheating was suspected – as many already do now.

In effect, many of us already are on strike against an Honor System that we see as dysfunctional, tolerant and encouraging of dishonor generally and injuring what we hold most dear as faculty, academic integrity. We believe that our implicit and individual

actions could be made explicit and collective, to announce how urgently we believe reform is needed.

The threat of an Honor Strike should garner the attention of the University community. We hope it will persuade students that radical changes, not piecemeal adjustments, are needed. We hope it will elicit concern from students and alumni who may not realize the current sorry state of the Honor System. A strike might prompt the Administration to consider going much further to support faculty members when they act to uphold the student-run, University-sanctioned Honor System.

And a strike might shift our attitude as faculty from cynical withdrawal from the Honor System to a concerted and constructive embrace of one of the University's most venerable traditions, its ambition to create through the actions of its members a Community of Trust. It is with that time-honored vision in mind that we issue this call for reform. We hope that other members of the Community will heed and join us.

Respectfully submitted, the College Faculty's Ad Hoc Committee on the Honor System

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