

International Student Honor Education and Outreach Overview

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Overview:

The University of Virginia's Honor System currently faces the issue of disproportionate over-reporting of international students. International students make up a little over a tenth of the student body, but are reported for a significantly higher number of honor offenses. This problem stems from a number of potential causes, including lack of information and differences in academic, spotlighting by faculty, and cultural backgrounds. This report seeks to narrow down the exact issues that cause international students to be reported significantly more often than domestic students, and lay out actionable solutions that can be implemented over the next year. Such programs will require an understanding of the unique challenges that international students face at the University, as well as cooperation with faculty, students, and other stakeholders within the international student community. The ultimate aim is to increase specifically targeted education and outreach efforts to best address the underlying causes of over-reporting.

Background and Current Status:

Enrollment data from the Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies indicate that international student enrollment at the University has been steadily increasing over the past decade. The top five countries of citizenship for undergraduate international students as of fall of 2016 are China, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, India, and Canada. For graduate international students, the top countries of citizenship are China and India, together making up nearly half of all international graduate students. Most of the growth in international enrollment since 2009 has been in Chinese students at the graduate level, as well as European, British, and Chinese students at the undergraduate level. As of spring 2016, international students make up 11.5% of the total student body, 7.9% of the undergraduate population, and 20.5% of the graduate population.

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) 2016 Core Survey provides data on students' experiences and attitudes towards various aspects of their academic and social lives at the University. The data show that most international students come to the University seeking to work temporarily or pursue an advanced degree in the United States after graduation; many enroll for the perceived higher quality of education at US colleges. A majority of international students are seriously concerned about securing a job in the US after graduation, and many are concerned about financial needs like housing, medical insurance, and financial support. The survey also indicates that social problems like making friends and joining organizations are the primary difficulties for international students. However, close behind social issues are academic problems, like writing assignments in English and participating in classroom discussions. While most students report few difficulties in understanding lectures, writing and classroom participation are difficulties for roughly 20% of respondents. Many also feel that professors and students do not show enough interest in learning about or understanding the international student community at the University.

Exact numbers regarding the reporting of international student cases are not available due to the confidentiality restraints of the Honor System. However, the previous Committee has confirmed that international students are significantly over-reported relative to other demographics at the University, to the point where action is required. Anecdotally, many support officers have had to advise or otherwise work with international students reported for honor offenses. Even though the exact scope of the issue is not publicly available information, any kind of disproportionate reporting in the Honor System can undermine the fairness and effectiveness of our process. The previous Committee identified this as one of the major challenges to the current System, and excluding the larger philosophical debates around the Single Sanction and Honor as a whole, this is one of the primary issue that those working in Honor will have to face in the coming years.

Potential Causes:

There are several potential causes for the issue of over-reporting. At its core, the issue stems from two possible reasons: either international students as a whole commit more honor offenses than average domestic students, or they are spotlighted by faculty and therefore scrutinized and reported more often. There is no way to know which of these two reasons drives the over-reporting of international students; Honor would have to compare the actual number of honor offenses committed by domestic and international students against the number reported for each group, and no feasible way exists to find the actual number of potential honor offenses committed by the student body. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence and common sense indicate that the disproportionate reporting of international students is likely driven by both reporters and students, so a comprehensive approach should address both sides of the issue.

1. Spotlighting by faculty

International students can be spotlighted by faculty. It is possible that some faculty members could have implicit biases that lead them to scrutinize international students more, leading to more reporting of international students. While it is unlikely that professors and faculty are explicitly targeting international students, they may implicitly suspect international students of cheating more often. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, since greater suspicion could lead professors to scrutinize international students work more closely, which could lead to confirm the original bias.

As stated before, there is no way to quantify the extent to which spotlighting is a problem for any group of students. Most faculty are not explicitly making a judgement against international students, and even if they were, it would be impossible to prove that the increased reporting of international students was not actually driven by the students themselves committing more offenses. However, Honor must engage with faculty to address this issue, as faculty represent the vast majority of reporters in the Honor System. This could involve educating professors and teaching assistants on how to work with international students, and making sure that they know how to make resources available in their classes to prevent honor offenses.

2. Lack of knowledge

International students may lack knowledge of the Honor System and what constitutes violations of the Honor Code. While most average UVA students do not have an extensive understanding of how the Honor System works, it is possible that international students may not fully understand the system as well as domestic students. This could be because of their different academic backgrounds, or language barriers, or other factors. Often, international students come from educational institutions where academic integrity is not emphasized or taught in-depth, meaning that their understanding of these concepts can be very different from that of domestic students.

Honor has not previously focused specifically on educating international students, meaning that for the most part we have been assuming that international students have as much knowledge of the system as domestic students. This assumption should be revisited and we should try to address any existing information gaps. While Honor does have a presence among incoming students during the beginning of the year, it is easy for Honor's message to be drowned out or forgotten in the information overload of the first few weeks. The education process, particularly for international students, needs to be thorough and ongoing as they enter and continue through their time at the University.

3. Different academic backgrounds

Education systems in other countries are often very different from the United States. Other countries may have different standards for academic citations and references, or other forms of academic integrity. While most domestic students have passable familiarity with the rules of academia from their time in primary and secondary school, international students may not be familiar with these standards. From the experiences of Honor educators and advisors, international students enter the University with a different understanding of honor as academic integrity. Different countries have very different standards when it comes to issues like citation and collaboration.

The line between collaboration and cheating may be defined differently in other countries; while we have a strict and rigorous definition of dishonest academic behavior, such things may be acceptable in the countries where some international students come from. The adjustment to a significantly more rigorous Honor System may be difficult for a student coming from a very different background, especially as international students are navigating all the other facets of University life.

4. Additional academic pressure

While all students face pressure to succeed at the University, international students often experience additional pressure from their unique status here. They are far away from home and family, paying a significant amount of money, in a different culture and country, and often speaking a different language. This can make students feel that they must succeed to make up for the costs of going to the University, adding to their pressure. This can also be exacerbated by cultural pressures, especially when students come from cultures that heavily emphasize academic success. The mental stress of a foreign environment with many unfamiliar cultural values adds an enormous amount of strain on international students, even if they are fully equipped to do academic work.

5. Cultural differences

International students often come from vastly different cultural backgrounds, and they may find aspects of the Honor System difficult to understand because of this. The Honor System is deeply rooted in many traditionally American concepts and ideas, which are immediately familiar and intuitive to domestic students but may not be to international students. For example, while we often use American legal metaphors to explain the case process, that may not be helpful to a student from a country with a different judicial system. Being aware of these differences and being thorough in explaining our process is crucial.

A large part of this is our student-run system. Student self-governance is in many ways a unique tradition of the University; few colleges in the US have a student-run Honor System, and it is mostly unheard of at academic institutions in other countries. Additionally, cultural values in other countries may differ, as many other cultures may place a high premium on academic success at any cost. In some places, collaboration and lower standards for citation may be the norm instead of the exception, although this is obviously not true of all international students.

Analysis:

Without data and other information, it is difficult to know which, if any, of the reasons listed above actually cause the disproportionate reporting. Besides the basic demographic data that Honor collects on accused students, it is not possible to quantify the scale of the issue or the exact causes. However, anecdotal evidence and information provides a window into understanding the complexities of international students and their interactions with Honor. In many cases, the issues above are connected and contribute to each other as well as the larger issue of over-reporting.

To better understand why international students are over-reported and how the Honor Committee can prevent this, we should engage more with both international students themselves as well as the organizations that work most closely with them. This includes people and organizations such as the International Residential College, the Center for American English Language and Culture, the International Studies Officer, the Multicultural Student Center, international student CIOs, and other stakeholders.

Over the course of the summer, I interacted with international students during orientation and information sessions about Honor at the University. I used this time to both test-drive education presentation strategies, as well as learn from international students themselves about their understanding of Honor and academic integrity. From these experiences, I was able to glean useful information about our education strategies and some deficiencies that could be corrected in the coming year.

Based on these interactions with the international students and their responses to questions asked during the presentation, the vast majority of international students do not come from academic backgrounds with honor systems or honor codes. Indeed, many have never been in an environment where academic honor is heavily emphasized at all. Not only is the concept of a student-run honor system relatively new for international students, but for many this is their first in-depth exposure to the concepts of academic integrity, like formal definitions of plagiarism and academic fraud. Academic honor systems, especially student-run ones, are rare in the US, and essentially unheard of in most other countries. While many domestic students also come in with a limited understanding of academic honor, this problem is exacerbated for international students, who sometimes come from a vastly different background. Indeed, for many international students, collaboration may be the norm wherever they come from, and our more stringent standards feel unfamiliar and draconian. This must be considered in education and outreach efforts moving forward.

Considering that one-fifth of the graduate student population consists of international students, the Honor System must engage more with graduate students in general. This is often difficult to do; student government organizations seem to be primarily filled by undergraduates, and bridging the gap between undergraduates and graduates is often difficult. Additionally, graduate students enter the University with much less fanfare than undergraduates, without a Convocation emphasizing Honor or other such introductory material (beyond a basic orientation). This means Honor has fewer opportunities to impress its message and key information upon incoming graduate students, especially international students. While graduate student outreach overall has areas for improvement, the prevalence of international graduate students only makes this a more urgent area of focus.

With respect to faculty spotlighting: it is not possible to prove or confirm the extent to which faculty spotlighting contributes to the over-reporting of certain demographics of students, like international students. As stated before, one would need to show that out of the total number of international students that actually commit honor offenses, a higher percentage of those students are reported compared to domestic students. There is no practical way to determine or estimate these numbers, though this does not mean that the issue does not exist. However, it does create difficulties in formulating the best strategy to approach faculty. For Honor, the best solution is likely to make sure faculty and staff are aware of the unique challenges of international students and the possibility that they may not be entirely aware of the nuances of the US academic honor system. Making these expectations explicit and clear in every class will not only help international students, but domestic students as well.

Issues and Solutions:

An array of solutions will be required, tackling different aspects of the problem. Below are some general guidelines for programs to address the issue, as well as potential roadblocks that remain to be resolved.

There is very clearly a significant need for Honor education programs, especially for incoming international students. These not only need to cover the workings of the student-run Honor System, but also the fundamentals of what academic integrity in the US means and what constitutes or could constitute an honor offense at UVA. While it can be assumed that most domestic students come into University with a basic understanding of rules of academic integrity from their secondary or primary school education, often international students have never had any formal training in the subject. After giving multiple presentations and talking with students, it was evident that essentially none of them had ever had a presentation on academic integrity in any setting, making our education and outreach even more critical.

Attendance remains the primary issue for Honor events in any context, and this is certainly for international students. Speaking with Adrienne Byrd from the International Studies Office, Honor has attempted to conduct events with international students in past years, but it remains extremely difficult to get students to attend after the initial orientation period. The most straightforward way to address this issue is to create better partnerships with international student-centered organizations, so that their membership can support attendance numbers at events Honor holds for international students. This kind of outreach will be critical in spreading the message of Honor to international students.

Since data on case demographics remain confidential, it is difficult to establish metrics of success for the programs that we run for international students this year. With the relatively small sample of students reported for Honor offenses each year, any drop or increase in the number of international students reported is difficult to attribute to Honor's education and outreach efforts. However, better education and outreach is likely to have a wider impact among the student body, regardless of measurable reporting statistics. As far as demographic statistics are concerned, Honor should consider more consistently recording basic demographic information, detached from any identifying case details, to keep better track of case and spotlighting trends.

At the core of any programs that Honor chooses to implement must be an understanding that international students come from a vastly different cultural and academic background. While few will ever intend to break the Honor Code, the gaps in knowledge and understanding of our system can ultimately lead to conflict. The lines between collaboration and cheating, referencing and plagiarism, and other such behavior depends largely on where a student comes from; this problem will only be exacerbated in coming years as more and more international students continue to come to the University. For the Honor System to work for all students, we as an organization must be committed to working with international students and building their understanding of Honor from the beginning to the end.

Proposals:

Over the course of the next year, multiple programs and initiatives could be implemented to address the over-reporting issue. Listed below are brief descriptions of some of the programming efforts planned for the next year. For conciseness, full details are not provided in this report but will instead be formulated with the education and outreach teams.

1. Internal education for Support Officers/Committee Members

- a. During support officer pool, committee meetings, and new officer training, include a section on how support officers can best advise, support, and educate international students, as well as policies/programs that could benefit them.
 - b. Support officer training/dialogues could include sections on international students in particular
2. External education for student body
 - a. Involves education presentation to different CIOs and student organizations around Grounds, as well as making international student handbooks available for more students and working closely with ISO
3. International student town hall/roundtable
 - a. An event to sit down and discuss how international students perceive Honor, like a focus group for international students and honor. Could involve multilingual presentations.
4. Outreach partnerships with international student CIOs/organizations (partial listing)
 - a. Mainland Student Network
 - b. Asian Leadership Council
 - c. Global Student Council
 - d. VISAS
 - e. Global Greeters
 - f. International Residential College
5. Eastern vs Western perspectives (faculty talk)
 - a. An interesting proposal to sponsor a faculty discussion about Eastern and Western perspectives on honor, education, and academic integrity. This could also be generalized to US vs non-US.
6. ALC Outreach Series (as proposed by Eve Immonen)
 - a. Further details are outlined in the proposed outlined by support officer Eve Immonen