

Honor Codes Work Where Honesty Has Already Taken Root

By Jennifer Dirmeyer and Alexander C. Cartwright

The possibility that 125 Harvard students “improperly collaborated” on an exam in the spring has galvanized a continuing discussion about the use of honor codes.

While Harvard administrators hope that an honor code can improve the academic integrity of the college, critics—especially Harvard students—are skeptical that signing a piece of paper will suddenly cause a cheater to change his ways.

They’re right. Not all colleges have what it takes to make an honor code effective—not because the students aren’t honest, but because they don’t expect anyone else to be. And with honor codes, expectations determine reality.

According to research by Donald L. McCabe, a professor of management at Rutgers University who specializes in student integrity, students at colleges with honor codes—typically student-enforced—cheat less than their counterparts elsewhere do. Our experience at Hampden-Sydney College would seem to support this conclusion: we find little evidence of cheating, even when professors work in their offices during exams. Indeed, you have not seen an honor code at work until you have seen a show of hands for those who did not do the reading for today’s class turn out to be completely accurate.

Our honor code is strictly enforced, and the enforcement is handled by an all-student court. Students convicted of lying or cheating can expect to receive punishments ranging from suspension to expulsion.

However, honor codes don’t always work. Mr. McCabe says that their success depends on a “culture of academic integrity” that leads students to take enforcement of the rules seriously. But economic theory suggests that it’s more a matter of expectations. When it works, the culture makes for a successful honor code as much as the honor code makes for a successful culture.

Student expectations about the integrity of their classmates can determine whether the college culture reinforces honesty. Say that each student arrives as a “cheater” type, an “honest” type, or somewhere on the continuum between them. Whatever the individual’s innate level of integrity, we believe that each student will decide whether or not to cheat by weighing the costs and benefits.

With a peer-enforced honor code, the likelihood of being caught depends on other students’ tolerance for cheating. Students who enter a college of mostly “honest” types will more often choose not to cheat even if they are innately “cheater” types, because the higher risk of getting caught makes the costs greater.

That leads to a feedback loop, as more of the population behaves like “honest” types than normally would, increasing the impression that everyone is honest and raising still higher the expectation of being caught. This feedback loop generates the culture of trust and integrity that students—like those at, say, Davidson College, which has a well-publicized honor code—reportedly value so highly.

Unfortunately, the feedback loop can go the other way. If a student enters a college with mostly “cheater” types, not only are the costs of cheating very low, encouraging fellow “cheater” types to cheat, but the benefits of cheating (or the costs of not cheating) are very high, encouraging even “honest” types to cheat. That leads more

students to cheat than would normally do so, creating a culture of dishonesty.

The success of the honor code, then, depends on the expectations that students have of their peers’ behavior, which is why colleges with successful honor codes must invest considerable resources in programs that influence how the honor code is perceived.

At Hampden-Sydney, new students participate in small discussions led by peers for two hours before a completely silent three-hour signing ceremony, during which all students sign the pledge, one by one, in front of their peers. Members of the Student Court, complete with a staff of student investigators and advisers, routinely visit classrooms to talk about the honor code, and faculty and staff reinforce the message on syllabi and in class discussions.

Is an honor code the answer to problems of academic integrity on every campus? The answer is, not unless students there think it is. Here

is a point worth noting for those students fortunate enough to study at an institution with a functioning honor code: it is far easier to maintain a culture of integrity than it is to build one.

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