INSIGHTS

The Evolution of Collegiate Honor Codes

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ABSTRACT

Collegiate honor codes have been around for over 200 years. During this time, their purpose and use have evolved from a means for students to defend their reputation, to weeding out unwanted students, to enforcing academic integrity. Today, character development has become a core focus of collegiate honor codes. Awareness of this evolution is critical to the successful implementation and administration of collegiate honor codes and our pursuit of character and leadership development.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Honor Code, Character Development, Character Education, Higher Education

Collegiate honor systems are a form of student self-government that establishes, oversees, and enforces standards of ethical conduct. Unlike the more common academic integrity policy, they empower students to own the culture of integrity at their institution. Furthermore, they take a psychological approach to academic misconduct by promoting the development of moral thinking and creating a social contract between members (Ayala-Enriquez & Guerrero-Dib, 2024). Honor systems typically include an honor code, a student oath, a peer judiciary process, unproctored exams, and some expectation for peer reporting (Hoekema, 1994; Lyman, 1927; McCabe, 2024; Tatum et al., 2018; Zoll, 1996). Schools with longstanding honor systems routinely claim them as central to their institutional identity (Limneos, 2023).

Schools with an honor system are frequently referred to as honor code schools (Eaton & Fishman, 2024). As a result, researchers and institutional policies often use the terms honor code and honor system interchangeably when referring to their student-run programs. Unfortunately, some schools have also referred to their academic integrity

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policies as honor codes, which can lead to confusion. In this paper, the term honor code implies the existence of a student-run honor system.

Today, honor codes are designed to promote the ethical development of their students through an environment of trust and respect (Ball, 1997; Charles, 1968; Nuss, 1996), but they did not all start out that way.

The Origins of Collegiate Honor Codes

In the United States, collegiate honor systems date back nearly 250 years and are deeply rooted in Virginia (Baldwin, 1915). The College of William & Mary proudly boasts the adoption of the first university honor code in 1779. What started as a gentlemen's code focused on social norms was eventually formalized as a written legacy, adding a student pledge in 1784 (William & Mary, 2024). Nearby, the University of Virginia claims honor was at their institution's core since its founding in 1825 (Barefoot, 2008) and touts the oldest entirely student-run honor system, starting in 1842 (University of Virginia, 2024). Similarly, the University of Richmond has had an honor system since 1830 (The Commonwealth Times, 2004), the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) claims an honor concept since 1839 (Virginia Military Institute, 2024), and Washington & Lee University adopted their code in the 1840s (Washington & Lee University, 2024).

From there, the concept spread (Geiger, 1922), and several other schools adopted student-run disciplinary systems in the 1800s, including Indiana University (1870), the University of Maine (1873), North Carolina (1890), Princeton (1893), and Haverford College (1897). Of note, in 1863, students at the University of Illinois unanimously agreed to set up the most elaborate system at the time. Though not called an honor code, it was developed to oversee student discipline and included executive, legislative, and judicial components. It even had a system of fines (Sheldon, 1901). Meanwhile, other schools, such as Amherst, the University of Pennsylvania, Vermont, Wesleyan, and Bates, experimented with collaboration between faculty and students rather than allowing an entirely student-run system (Sheldon, 1901).

In 1901, a survey of 32 colleges showed that 17 (53.1%) had implemented honor systems (Sheldon, 1901). By 1915, 125 of 425 colleges surveyed (29.4%) claimed honor systems, while an additional 43 claimed to have an informal honor code, and 31 were considering adoption (Baldwin, 1915).

Not all implementations were successful. The University of Illinois' student attempt at self-governance struggled with frequent policy changes and narrowly escaped multiple threats of rebellion. In 1883, the Attorney-General of Illinois got involved and challenged the system's legality. Shortly after, the students voted to abolish it (Sheldon, 1901). Meanwhile, Stanford University's initial attempt to establish an honor system in the 1890s failed due to the reluctance of students to report dishonesty (Sheldon, 1901). Several other schools also abandoned their codes due to concerns about the fairness of student courts, the difficulty of sustaining student investment, and a lack of willingness to report peers (Kelly, 1925; Lyman, 1927; Sheldon, 1901). At the time, some scholars reasoned that honor was an aristocratic product fostered in the antebellum South by family pride and predicted that honor codes would struggle to gain traction in northern schools (Limneos, 2023; Sheldon, 1901; Streeter, 2019).

Meanwhile, the Military Service Academies and Senior Military Colleges also have a strong affiliation with student-run honor systems. Though none of their codes was formalized in writing until 1922 (Gebicke, 1995), all of them have had honor concepts imbedded in their institutions since the 1800s. The development of their codes was aligned with Christian moralization and based on the ideals of restrained manhood, gentlemanly conduct, and self-discipline (Limneos, 2023).

Norwich University assigned cadet boards to investigate honor offenses as early as 1823, and Virginia Tech allowed students to form committees overseeing a quasi-official honor system as early as 1882. VMI has had a matriculation oath addressing honor and encouraging self-regulation since 1848, and North Georgia's first cadet honor pledge dates back to 1883. At the United States Military Academy (West Point), cadets who sought to establish and enforce standards of honorable behavior formed what was commonly referred to as the "Vigilance Committee" in the 1870s (Limneos, 2023). It endured as an unofficially sanctioned organization until being formally recognized as an Honor Committee in 1922 (Sorley, 2009).

Early Focus on Reputation

During their early years, honor codes were not focused on academic cheating or ethical development. Rather, emphasis was on the inherent trustworthiness of students and the expectation that their honesty should not be questioned (Geiger, 1922; Sorley, 2009). More emphasis was placed on peer loyalty and reputation than academic integrity (Glanzer, 2021), and honor codes sometimes complicated or even undermined efforts to enforce rules against cheating (Glanzer, 2021). They also served as a mechanism to dismiss or purge unwanted students rather than as a tool to enlighten and develop them (Mathews, 1930).

In a period when personal honor and reputation were highly valued (Freeman, 2017), honor codes were primarily used as a defensive measure against disgrace. A gentleman's word was his bond, and any hint of disrespect was dangerous. Calling someone a liar equated to fighting words, and duels were an accepted way to settle disputes (Freeman, 2017). These cultural norms extended to college campuses, and dueling was explicitly forbidden at the College of William & Mary (Geiger, 1922) – probably due to a riot after two students were punished for dueling in 1802 (Santos, 2013). If a student's honor was challenged, it could easily devolve into violence, and the student enforcement of honor codes sometimes resulted in bloodshed.

At the University of Virginia, students during this time were described as proud, easily bruised, and quick to violence. They demanded respect, concealed knives, and brandished guns freely. Their sense of "honor" compelled them to respond when it was questioned, and they stabbed each other with little to no thought or hesitation (Streeter, 2019). The most prominent example of violence associated with honor codes occurred in 1840, when a law professor at the University of Virginia was shot and killed by a student amidst escalating tensions over enforcement of student discipline (Santo, 2013). The student population condemned the killer, resolved to bring justice to the situation, and established a fully student-run honor system 2 years later (Adams, n.d.).

At West Point, cadets were taking honor cases into their own hands as early as 1862 when several attempted to tar and feather a fellow cadet who had admitted theft. Three years later, another student accused of theft decided to leave the Academy for fear of being tarred and feathered as well. Luckily, the Superintendent found out, investigated the situation, and exonerated the falsely accused student. Nevertheless, by 1871, the Vigilance Committee had established a reputation for violence, severe hazing, and silencing – which consisted of students and faculty ignoring an accused cadet until they chose to leave of their own volition (Sorley, 2009). A student found in violation by an honor committee but not disenrolled would receive a new dormitory room with no roommate, a separate dining table, and a separate desk in each classroom (Charles, 1968).

Meanwhile, at the Naval Academy, an informal honor code typically resulted in a fistfight if a student's integrity was questioned. In 1905, one of these fights resulted in the death of a midshipman. As a result, President Theodore Roosevelt ordered the honor code to be abolished, and honor standards were instead incorporated into Academy regulations (Ball, 1997; Gebicke, 1995).

The Shift to Academic Integrity

With the turn of the twentieth century, the number of colleges and honor codes grew. In 1900, only 977 institutions of higher education existed in the United States, with an average of 243.6 students per school. By the 1990s, the number grew to 3,706 institutions with an average of 3,970.6 students per school (Nichols & Good, 2000). That's a 1,530% increase in student population per institution! Higher education enrollment nearly quadrupled from 1940 to 1970 (Goldin & Katz, 1999), and both the number and percentage of high school graduates attending college continued to increase dramatically from the 1970s until 2010 (Hanson, 2024). Though there is no master list, the percentage of schools with honor codes appears to have remained relatively stable.

As the number of honor codes grew, their purpose also evolved to become increasingly focused on academic integrity. The first documented analysis of collegiate honor codes was conducted in 1901 by Professor Henry Sheldon of the University of Oregon in his book *Student Life and Customs.* At that time, honor codes were still focused on conduct and the personal honor of students rather than cheating. However, they were gaining broader attention, and a desire to shift the focus was growing. West Point acknowledged cheating as a violation for the first time in 1905, but, even then, it was added by the administration, not the students (Sorley, 2009). By 1910, large-scale discussions surrounding honor systems, with universities advocating both for and against them, were occurring, as noted by the 1910 American Bar Association proceedings (Mathews, 1930).

In response to spirited discussions among students and faculty on the efficacy of honor systems, a committee at Ohio Wesleyan University was appointed to conduct an intensive study on the topic. In 1930, the U.S. Department of Education (known then as the Office of Education within the Department of the Interior) published its findings in a bibliography referencing 134 books and articles on honor systems and academic integrity (Mathews, 1930). Twelve consisted of studies on the status of honor systems, 25 provided descriptions of existing codes, and 44 provided discussions on academic honesty and the honor system. The final 53 papers were all written in the 1920s on academic cheating, highlighting its growth as a research interest and its link to honor codes.

By the 1960s, over 400 papers had been written on issues of academic dishonesty (Fishman, 2024), and the shift toward student cheating as a focal point culminated in its first large-scale study. Bowers (1964) found that college cheating was prevalent, and less cheating was occurring in honor code environments.

The Introduction of Due Process

As campuses grew in number and size, concerns about cohesion and standards also intensified (Keppel, 1917; Thelin & Gasman, 2003). The rise in student diversity and part-time attendees transformed once-small, relatively homogeneous campuses into large, culturally diverse institutions. This led to a diminished sense of community and common purpose among students, as well as increased competition. Student focus was now on securing a grade, a degree, and employment (Horowitz, 1986; Levine, 1980; McCabe, 1993). By 1935, West Point proclaimed that their function was not to serve as a reformatory of morals and formally embraced the ideals of a single sanction – disenrollment – for honor violations (Homser, 1984). Similar interpretations were adopted by several Senior Military Colleges.

Modern due process rights for college students were driven by the U.S. Supreme Court case *Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education* in 1961 (Lee, 2014). Coupled with a shift from parental-style oversight of student conduct to a more hands-off approach (Hoekema, 1994), university administrations began to accept that an effective educational process depends on student cooperation (Hanson, 1990) – a goal that might be accomplished through an honor code. As a result, student involvement in college disciplinary processes increased across the country from the 1970s to the 1990s (Conway & Lee, 2014). By the 1990s, over 1,000 institutions of higher education (27%) had adopted some type of honor code (Zoll, 1996).

At the same time, legal attacks on the constitutionality of honor codes at the Military Service Academies played out in federal courts, driving the administrative system to become more regulated (Ball, 1997; Borman, 1976; Gebicke, 1995; Sorley, 2009). Interest in control over honor codes had moved from the students to the institutions, to the nation. Subsequent reforms introduced crucial due process into honor codes, enhancing confidence in the system and student buy-in. However, they also increased bureaucracy and extended investigation timelines. Single sanctions were officially removed at the Air Force Academy in 1960 (Randolph, 2022) and West Point in 1977 (Sorley, 2009).

The Shift Toward Character Development

Research on honor codes and academic integrity continued in scattered pockets across the country without a disciplinary home until the arrival of the internet, an advocate, and a focal point for integration (Fishman, 2024). Dr. Donald McCabe, commonly known as the father of academic integrity, conducted the most prominent study on collegiate honor codes. His vast research on academic integrity and college cheating spanned from 1990 until 2012, culminating in his book, *Cheating in College: Why Students Do It and What Educators Can Do About It*. In 1992, he founded the Center for Academic Integrity as a research-driven organization to promote academic integrity on college campuses. In 2010, the organization became the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI; Gallant, 2020).

With Dr. McCabe and the ICAI, a shift toward character development emerged in the 1990s. Rather than focusing on prohibited behaviors, they began promoting the positive values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility that create a foundation for responsible conduct in students (Center for Academic Integrity, 1999). McCabe et al. (2012) identified the decision to cheat or not as one of the most basic ethical decisions faced by college students, and he intentionally framed academic integrity as an element of character development. McCabe advocated for moral education, cultivation of aspirational communities, and promotion of prosocial values in addition to traditional honor codes for student development.

Around the same time, the Military Service Academies also began focusing on character development and remediation for misconduct. The Air Force Academy made a series of substantial philosophical and administrative changes to its honor code in the early 1990s, focusing on honorable living and “doing the right thing” rather than the four don’ts: lying, stealing, cheating, and tolerating (Dierker, 1997). The first honor probation was implemented on October 9th, 1990 and consisted of a 6-month suspended disenrollment while a cadet went through remediation (Ball, 1997). West Point implemented a similar 6-month honor mentorship program designed as an intensive process of guided self-examination and self-evaluation before making a final retention decision (Sorley, 2009).

The Effectiveness of Modern Honor Codes

The elaborate research of McCabe and his colleagues at over 200 institutions from 1990 through 2008 repeatedly found that collegiate honor codes effectively promote integrity and reduce cheating (McCabe & Pavela, 2000; McCabe et al., 2012). Countless other researchers have replicated his findings and endorsed honor codes as a way to promote academic integrity (Tatum, 2022; Zoll, 1996). Yet, it is worth noting that not everyone has come to the same conclusion. Hall (1996) found that the existence of an honor code is not of itself a deterrent to academic dishonesty, and Arnold et al. (2007)

found that honor code schools do not self-report significantly lower amounts of cheating than non-honor code schools.

The most powerful influence on student cheating is their perception of peer behavior (McCabe & Treviño, 1997), and honor codes can significantly impact student behavior (McCabe et al., 2001a). Seeing other students engage in prosocial behaviors – such as designing and enforcing academic integrity policies, making pledges, educating their peers, initiating dialogue, and behaving honestly – can play a significant role in shaping and upholding standards of academic integrity (Ball, 1997; McCabe & Pavela, 2000; McCabe et al., 2002; Roig & Marks, 2006; Zoll, 1996).

Beyond a reduction in cheating, collegiate honor codes can play a valuable role in character development (Charles, 1968; Lyman, 1927). Honor education encourages students to gain a deeper understanding of why cheating is morally wrong (Schwartz et al., 2013). Then, holding students accountable for the ethical behavior of their peers forces them to wrestle with their values (McCabe et al., 2001b). Furthermore, honor codes have a unique capacity to foster a trusting community and cultivate honesty and integrity among students (May & Loyd, 1993). This development, in turn, translates into ethical behavior beyond the college setting. McCabe et al. (2012) reported that individuals who experienced an honor code in college and currently worked in an organization with a strong code of ethics exhibited higher levels of ethical behavior in the workplace.

Public perception of institutions with robust honor codes can also enhance their overall reputation and student recruitment (Manuel, 2020). Despite an inability to completely eradicate cheating, honor codes hold intrinsic value. They symbolize the societal ideals of honor, integrity, and ethical conduct, which remain deeply valued traits in our society and essential qualities desired in the workforce. These are important and respected aspirations for any community (Charles, 1968; Hall, 1996).

However, collegiate honor codes are not a silver bullet, and they should not be implemented solely to combat student cheating. Issues with campus culture must be addressed first (Hendershott et al., 2000), involving all levels of the institution – from students to faculty to governing boards (Nuss, 1984). McCabe and Treviño (1993) emphasized this point when they found that some non-honor code schools with strong cultures of academic integrity exhibited lower levels of cheating compared to institutions with longstanding honor code traditions that were not effectively internalized. Merely having an honor code does not automatically promote integrity nor deter cheating (Hall, 1996; Scott, 2001; Zoll, 1996).

The easiest way to render a code ineffective is to use it as window dressing (McCabe et al., 2012). New students who arrive with a positive attitude toward the honor code will quickly become cynics when they realize that it is neither followed nor enforced. Their idealistic views are likely to degenerate quickly, leading them to conform to prevailing social norms despite written regulations (McCabe et al., 2001a; Waring & Do, 2012). For an honor code to work, wrongdoers must perceive that their actions are socially unacceptable, they will be caught, and they will receive severe penalties for misconduct (McCabe & Treviño, 1993).

Student conviction that academic integrity is a fundamental value worth upholding is central to the success of an honor code (Ball, 1997; Roig & Marks, 2006; Tatum, 2022; Zoll, 1996). They appeal to students' desire to live up to a higher standard as well as their pride and commitment to an academic community (Hoekema, 1994). Honor codes can be a tremendous asset for institutions that embrace them, and educational leaders should do everything possible to facilitate the trust and privileges they provide (Zoll, 1996). However, they cannot force them. The key is student ownership (Lyman, 1927) with faculty support (Hall, 1996). Though this has been challenging for some schools, others have found wide commitment and ongoing student support (McCabe & Pavela, 2005; Raman & Ramlogan, 2020).

Then, even if an honor code has adequate support and is implemented properly, they still have critics. The greatest criticisms have been over unproctored exams, single sanctions, and peer reporting policies (Beatty, 1992). Unproctored exams can enable cheaters (Alonso, 2023), while single sanctions have been viewed as draconian, with an expulsion penalty so severe it may discourage reporting (Cheung, 2014). Meanwhile, mandatory reporting policies are perceived to create a conflict of loyalties (Mathews, 1930), which can be especially challenging in a society where peer loyalty is valued, and reporting wrongdoing is often frowned upon (Zoll, 1996). As a result, if not properly integrated and enforced, honor codes may inadvertently enable and mask cheating rather than deterring it (Gibbons, 2007).

Finally, most campuses cultures are simply not strong enough to support a traditional honor code (McCabe et al., 2012). Developing and nurturing an honor code is most challenging at larger institutions where the sense of community is less pronounced (Arnold et al., 2007; Lyman, 1927; McCabe & Pavela, 2000). Consequently, honor systems are typically found at private schools with small to moderate enrollment and are often church-affiliated (Hall, 1996). The best examples of thriving honor codes are likely at the Military Service Academies and Senior Military Colleges where their mission is shaped entirely around the character development of their students.

Conclusion

As a longstanding American tradition, collegiate honor codes continue to gain traction and have begun to spread globally (Raman & Ramlogan, 2020; Rettinger & Searcy, 2012; Shepherd, 2007). Despite their imperfections, modern honor codes have consistently demonstrated their superiority over other methods to reduce cheating (May & Loyd, 1993; Novotney, 2011) and have evolved to emphasize character development. By incorporating collegiate honor codes, organizations can strengthen their ethical culture, engaging all members and focusing on clear, aspirational goals (Dufresne, 2004; McCabe et al., 2012). This approach encourages a commitment to ethical behavior and supports a growth mindset. Looking forward, honor codes will undoubtedly continue to evolve, leveraging research to build on their accomplishments, shape academic cultures, and promote character development in higher education.

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