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Student-led honor codes as a method for reducing university cheating

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Abstract: As academic dishonesty is perceived to be on the rise in European universities, creative approaches to supporting integrity are being considered. In the U. S., some universities approach the issue by giving students more, not less, control over their academic lives. Student-led honor systems provide students a means of creating a community at their university that values academic integrity and enforces it as a social norm rather than as an abstract rule. This paper outlines the history and functioning of such programs, provides empirical support for their effectiveness, and a case study of one student-led honor system, at the University of Mary Washington.

Keywords: *academic integrity, case study, cheating, plagiarism, moral code*

1. Background

Academic dishonesty is a substantial and growing problem both in the U. S. (McCabe) and Europe (Sattler). At the University level, students are violating the rules of academic conduct at alarming rates (McCabe; Sattler), and younger students to an even greater degree (Anderman and Midgley, 2004). This issue has gained a great deal of public notice, particularly in Germany, where there have been scandals involving significant plagiarism by government ministers during their University careers. This phenomenon is not limited to Germany, however. Pal Schmitt, President of Hungary resigned in April 2012 (BBC News, 2012) after it was revealed that much of his thesis at Semmelweis University was copied. A similar situation occurred in Romania, with Prime Minister Victor Ponta, although he remains in office. As a result of this academic climate, scholars from many disciplines (Rettinger and Kramer, 2009; McCabe and Trevino, 1993;

Burkatzki et al., this volume; Sattler et al., in press) are considering the causes and consequences of academic dishonesty and university administrators are asking what can be done to prevent it.

In the U. S., there are two models for supporting and enforcing academic integrity at universities. The first is a faculty-led system in which enforcement, integrity education, and the faculty or administration handles student response and sanctioning. This system is also most common among universities in Europe (Hilliard et al., 2011). The second, which is less common outside of North America, is the student-led honor system. Under these systems, students take primary responsibility for both creating an honorable culture and enforcing rules in the case of violations. While it may seem counterintuitive to have a successful regime of self-monitoring, evidence (McCabe et al., 2001), is overwhelming that student-led honor systems (SLHS's) support integrity more effectively than their faculty led counterparts. The goal of this paper is to outline the history and practices of SHLSs in the U. S., describe some relevant behavioral research on academic integrity, and then use a single case study to connect the general practices to the research, in turn explaining why Honor Codes are so effective.

2. History and practices

Student-led honor systems in the U. S. originated in 1736 at the College of William and Mary (College of William and Mary, 2012) and the practice was extended in the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1842 at the University of Virginia (University of Virginia, 2012). An informal code of ethics may have existed at that time at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point (United States Military Academy, 2012) as well; in the modern era, SHLS's are commonly found at American military academies, including West Point, the U. S. Air Force Academy, and the U. S. Naval Academy. Non-federal academies such as the Virginia Military Institute maintain student-led honor systems as well. SLHS's are typically a feature of smaller, private universities such as Princeton University, where the SLHS began in 1893, although this is not universally true. Some larger public institutions like the University of Virginia and smaller public ones such as the University of Mary Washington, in Fredericksburg, Va. support student led systems as the core of an institutional ethos centered on honor. While SHLS's are found at a minority of U. S. universities, they are growing in popularity (McCabe and Trevino, 1997).

Certain key features are considered to be essential to a “true” academic Honor Code (Melendez, 1985), including 1. Student control of (or substantial input into) the institution’s academic integrity protocols; 2. Student control of the hearing and sanctioning process; 3. Unsupervised testing; 4. A pledge of honor expected or required with all work a student submits. Many of the SLHS institutions in the U. S. have these common features, but there is variation in their implementation. The systems at the military academies, for instance, often include responsibility for enforcement of both academic and non-academic policies (USMA, 2012).

Two key distinctions in implementation are the presence of a single sanction, in which all violations of the honor code result in dismissal from the institution, and an “obligation clause” in the honor code, in which students are given an affirmative obligation to report violations they witness or be subject to sanctions themselves.

3. Efficacy and behavioral science research

Decades of research by McCabe and his colleagues (e.g., McCabe et al., 2012) provide overwhelming evidence that a strong honor culture is the most powerful way to promote academic integrity and reduce cheating (broadly construed to include plagiarism). McCabe et al. (1997) conducted an anonymous survey of students enrolled at 21 universities in the United States with the goal of understanding contextual influences on cheating and academic integrity. Among the many conclusions of this study was that institutions with student-led honor systems consistently report fewer instances of cheating and plagiarism than other institutions. For example, 71% of students at non-SLHS honor systems and 54% of students reported serious cheating on campuses with a student-led honor system in 1995-1996 (McCabe et al., 1997). In more recent data, students at SHLS institutions cheated far less (fewer than 20%) than at similar institutions without an SHLS (around 30%) (McCabe et al., 2012). This is a large and pervasive difference. Significantly fewer students report exam copying, using crib notes, helping others on tests, plagiarism, unauthorized footnoting and impermissible collaboration when held to account by their peers, relative to non SHLS institutions.

Why are honor systems as effective as they are? McCabe and Trevino (1993) proposed a social learning (Bandura, 1986) approach to academic integrity in which incoming students learn

appropriate social norms from their peers. Their research and others' (O'Rourke et al., 2010; Carrell et al., 2005) strongly supports this idea. Survey data indicate that students who perceive more cheating around them report doing more themselves (O'Rourke et al., 2010), and merely being surrounded by students who report having cheated in the past leads to increased cheating behavior over time (Carrell et al., 2005). Student-led honor systems reduce cheating by causing it to be perceived as less normative by making expectations for integrity explicit and by reducing the amount of visible cheating. The less cheating a student perceives around him/her, the less likely it is that s/he will cheat.

A student's attitudes toward academic integrity are essential to determining behavior, and those attitudes are strongly influenced by the perceived social norms around them. For example, Jordan (2001) found that students who believe that cheating is widespread on their campus (as opposed to those who directly witness cheating) are more likely to do so themselves, over and above the influence of seeing that cheating directly. Student-led honor systems act to reduce the amount of cheating that students directly observe and also reduce their indirect perceptions of cheating, both of which are key factors influencing individual attitudes and behavior.

A second key factor in determining cheating is so-called "neutralizing attitudes" (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Rettinger et al., 2004). These attitudes represent ways that students are able to justify behaviors that violate their own internal ethical codes. For example, even a student who knows that copying a paper is wrong may still do so because s/he feels the assignment is unfair, everyone else is doing it, or the teacher does not care. Neutralizing attitudes like these have been consistently associated with academic cheating in both surveys and vignette experiments (Rettinger and Kramer, 2009). Administration-run honor systems can feel externally imposed to students compared to student-led systems. It is therefore the case that student-led honor systems engender fewer neutralizing attitudes toward cheating, making it more difficult to self-justify unethical behavior.

SLHS's prevent cheating in three fundamental ways. First, when students are given control, it encourages pro-social attitudes, which support academic integrity. Students are more likely to recognize the harm to others that results from cheating, they are more likely to recognize the value of honest work toward one's education, and they are less likely to justify cheating in a given situation.

Student-led honor systems also create a powerful deterrence mechanism. Survey results (Rettinger et al., in preparation) suggest that greater fear of punishment deters cheating more effectively than more Draconian penalties. When students are convinced that their peers will report them, the perception arises that cheating becomes difficult to do without being caught. So fewer students cheat, and this, in turn, reduces cheating overall, because as we have seen, witnessing cheating is a powerful inducement to cheat (O'Rourke et al., 2010).

Student-led honor systems represent an important response to the moral reasoning of emerging adults. Kohlberg (1969) proposed that many young adults have not entirely reached maturity with respect to their moral reasoning. Because many college students still utilize what Kohlberg (1969) calls "conventional morality," their behavior is guided by consideration of interpersonal relationships. Students in this stage of moral development fail to see the greater good in observing rules and regulations established by universal systems. Helping others by cheating, following a socially observed pattern of dishonesty, and blaming the professor for making a class difficult are hallmarks of this type of reasoning. By countering those considerations with other, powerful interpersonal arguments made by peers who reject cheating, student-led honor systems are able to communicate mores at a level with which students at this stage are comfortable. Emphasis on the interpersonal damage that cheating can cause can be an effective deterrent to the conventional moral thinking.

Finally, SHLS campuses benefit from the powerful communication of social mores. Student-led systems typically hold ceremonies and other learning opportunities early in a student's career, such as Mary Washington's Honor Convocation (described below; University of Mary Washington, 2012) or the re-ratification of the system held at Haverford College (Pennsylvania) each year (Haverford College, 2012). These activities act to emphasize the social sanctions attached to cheating over and above the academic sanctions. A successful honor system relies on both as a deterrent to cheating.

4. Case study

To best connect the outcomes of student-led honor systems with their operation we will describe the Honor System at the University of Mary Washington (UMW). Mary Washington is a

public university in Fredericksburg, Virginia with an undergraduate student body of roughly 4,000. Founded in 1908 as a “normal school” for educating women to become teachers, UMW was named for George Washington’s mother. In 1944, Mary Washington was named the women’s college of the University of Virginia, an institution with a rich SHLS tradition already more than a century old. In 1972, Mary Washington returned to independent status as Mary Washington College and admitted men for the first time. Today UMW continues as a multi-college university, with colleges of Arts and Sciences, of Business and of Education. Details about UMW and its honor system are available online at <http://www.umw.edu>.

The honor system at UMW is student-led and forbids students from lying, cheating, or stealing. The policies and principles of honor are set forth in an Honor Constitution and a guidebook that accompanies it. The Constitution calls for the Honor system to be administrated by an Honor Council, which is an elected body made up of 20 students (five representing each of the four years of study). The Council is chaired by a President and Vice-President, each elected from among the group. Responsibility for all University operations falls to a government-appointed board, the Board of Visitors. At Mary Washington, the Board of Visitors has delegated authority for all workings of the institution to a President, with the exception of the Honor System, which is delegated directly to the Honor Council. While their work is supervised by a procedural advisor who is a member of the faculty or administration, the Constitution clearly indicates that the students have fundamental control over the honor process.

The responsibilities of the Honor Council include: 1. Receiving accusations of Honor Code violations from members of the community, 2. Determining whether accusations meet criteria for consideration as Honor Code violations, 3. Holding honor hearings (to be described further below) and maintaining the hearing schedule, 4. Proposing modifications to the Honor Constitution, as necessary, and 6. Reporting directly to the Board of Visitors.

From the point of view of a typical student at UMW, the Honor System is introduced in printed and online materials distributed to prospective students even before admission. Once a new student arrives on campus, the Honor Council provides one hour of introduction to the system to all students in a mandatory session before classes begin. Following that session a formal convocation ceremony is conducted in which the Honor Council calls upon faculty and administrators to speak about honor to an assembly of the entire incoming student body. At this time, all new students sign an honor pledge stating,

I, as a student at the University of Mary Washington, do hereby accept the Honor System. I have read the Honor Constitution, understand it, and agree to abide by its provisions. Accordingly, I resolve to refrain from giving or receiving academic material in a manner not authorized by the instructor, from illegally appropriating the property of others, and from deliberately falsifying facts. I acknowledge that, in support of the Honor System, it is my responsibility to report any violations of the Honor Code of which I am aware. I realize that, in the event of a violation of the Honor Code, a plea of ignorance will not be acceptable, and that such a violation could result in my permanent dismissal from the University. I further pledge that I shall endeavor at all times to create a spirit of honor, both by upholding the Honor System myself and helping others to do so (University of Mary Washington, 2012: 7).

All student work at the University is expected to be accompanied by a shortened version of this pledge in which students affirm that they have not violated the Honor Code. They write, "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work (University of Mary Washington, 2012: 7)."

Any member of the Mary Washington community can accuse a student of a violation of the Honor Code. The first step in this process is usually a discussion between the accuser and accused. If, after that conversation, the accuser wishes to continue, s/he may file an official accusation with the Honor Council. If the Council feels that a violation has occurred, the process continues. Once the accused has been informed of the charge, s/he is given the opportunity to take responsibility for his/her actions at that time. If responsibility is accepted, the Honor Council convenes for a hearing to determine appropriate sanctions. If not, an "honor trial" is convened to determine responsibility. The entire process is student-run. The Honor Council President generally chairs the hearings, while Honor Council members determine responsibility and/or sanction, serve as advisors to both the accused and accuser, and hear appeals if requested. Faculty members serve as secondary advisors to the accused and accusers, and as procedural advisors during the hearings.

An honor hearing consists of statements by accused and accusers as well as an opportunity for each to question the other. The Honor Council members serving as jurors may also question both parties. Witnesses are allowed, if appropriate. Lawyers are permitted to advise

the accused, but the accused is expected to speak for him/ herself. The hearings are tightly scripted to ensure consistency and fairness.

If a student is found responsible for an honor violation or takes responsibility him/herself, the Honor Council jurors determine a sanction. Sanctions include honor education, which requires the accused to learn more about academic integrity generally and takes about 20 hours; community service at an approved local charity; loss of credit for the course in which the violation occurred; suspension, which is a loss of credit for all courses in the semester the violation occurred; and dismissal from the University. Suspension and dismissal are reserved for the most severe cases and repeat offenses.

At UMW, the most commonly reported offenses are forms of plagiarism. Relatively minor examples include a handful of phrases from uncited sources or a large quotation that is cited but not properly paraphrased. Those violations of the honor code frequently result in honor education sanctions, occasionally with community service. When a student submits a paper with a large percentage of the text plagiarized, loss of credit for the course is more likely. Suspension and expulsion are usually reserved for repeat offenses.

5. Connecting process to effectiveness

Surveys conducted among Mary Washington students indicate relatively low levels of cheating and plagiarism. When compared with data reported by McCabe, et al. (2012), UMW students report roughly 1/4th the rate of serious cheating (Rettinger, unpublished data), compared to other Honor Code institutions. We must note that the survey methods were quite different,¹ although the questions themselves are fairly similar. Thus, there is some evidence that the Mary Washington system is effective in deterring cheating, even relative to other Honor Code institutions

First, consider a student's early experiences with Mary Washington. Following the introduction of the honor system in materials for prospective and newly admitted students, within

¹ McCabe et al. (2012) utilize a large national sample in their research with an emphasis on understanding the demographics and correlates of cheating behavior. The integrity assessment is part of a much larger online survey designed to assess a wide range of variables. The Rettinger data was also conducted online but queried the entire UMW population about only cheating behavior and a small number of other items. It used a frequency rating scale for each cheating behavior, ranging from "never" to "almost every assignment".

48 hours of arriving on campus for the first time students discuss the Honor System with fellow students who serve on the Honor Council. In that meeting the rules are outlined, and the expectation that cheating is neither expected nor tolerated is reiterated. This foundational conversation serves as the basis for social learning that will take place during students' academic careers. By making explicit the expectations surrounding honor, behavior these students may witness later fits a schema. In this way, social mores are more easily established.

By signing the pledge during the early days of their UMW careers, students explicitly acknowledge that "ignorance of the rules is no excuse." This language reinforces the understanding that students are in control of their own academic integrity because they are trusted and thus also obliged to know the rules. Furthermore, the fact that their fellow students manage the entire honor orientation sends the subtle message that the honor atmosphere on campus is pervasive among and endorsed by the students, making it a bottom-up message rather than one imposed from the top down.

This message carries over into the Honor Hearing process. As students learn about the Honor Council, they recognize that its authority fundamentally stems from the student body. The Council is elected, and so its members answer to their peers. Their authority as an institution is also seen as a mandate from the students.

Another factor influencing the effectiveness of a student-led honor system depends on a willingness to report on the part of both faculty and students. Because exams are typically unproctored² and students trusted in other dealings, enforcement of the code requires participation by all members of the community. We propose that students internalize the values of honor more greatly when trust is granted by peers and friends, rather than by authority figures.

These features connect to neutralizing attitudes as well. While all beliefs can, in principle, be overridden by situational factors, it is more difficult to do so with beliefs that are intrinsic and strongly held (Sykes and Matza, 1957). At Mary Washington, honor is emphasized as well as conceptualized as a responsibility to one's friends and peers. This characterization is intended to make honor intrinsic and relevant to each individual and thus more difficult to neutralize. When contrasted with a top-down honor system, students consider honor to be a community value rather than an abstract set of rules to be followed.

² Exams typically consist of a set of questions of some but not all of the following types: multiple choice, short answer, essay, and problems to be solved (e.g., mathematics or chemical equations). Most are "closed book," individual exams with a time limit ranging from 50 minutes to 2 ½ hours.

As a result of these psychological processes, the social context at Mary Washington is different than at a non-Honor Code institution. Students witness much less cheating and so the social cues in their environment do not reinforce that behavior. Because honor violations are reported publicly (albeit anonymously), students are able to internalize the vicarious punishment of others, which also suppresses cheating behavior. Because the Honor Council is seen as legitimate, punishment imposed by it is also considered legitimate. As a result, neutralizing attitudes are less likely to develop as the result of resentment at seeing friends punished.

The Honor Code at The University of Mary Washington is a good example of the ways that SLHS's can be effective in reducing cheating and maintaining a climate of academic integrity on a university campus. By affecting students' attitudes starting early in their careers and maintaining a process that is considered legitimate, pro-social community values are effectively communicated and negative attitudes are undermined.

6. Concluding remarks

While institutions of higher education provide the structure for honor code implementation and adjudication, student run programs have a special capacity to enact the values associated with these codes through distinctive student leadership. SHLSs provide a model for self-governance and foster opportunities for students to exercise ownership for a system at the core of the student learning process. The evidence presented here as well as the experiences reported at the International Center for Academic Integrity indicate that providing students control over academic integrity decreases cheating and plagiarism. The University of Mary Washington represents an example of this process in action. Student-led honor systems are by no means common in the U. S., with perhaps as few as 100 meeting the strictest criteria (McCabe et al, 2012), many others have some of these attributes (McCabe, personal communication, 2012). They are effective when students gain an understanding of the meaning of academic integrity and create a community that values honor. This is not possible at all Universities, but the principles of self-determination, community building, and integrity can be applied in all situations.

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Studenckie kodeksy honorowe jako metoda ograniczania oszustw uniwersyteckich

Streszczenie

Na europejskich uniwersytetach obserwuje się coraz więcej nieuczciwych zachowań, z tego względu rozważa się różne kreatywne podejścia wspierające etykę i przestrzeganie prawa. Na niektórych uniwersytetach w Stanach Zjednoczonych przekazuje się studentom większą kontrolę nad ich akademickim życiem. Kierowane przez studentów systemy honorowe dostarczają środków, które pozwalają na tworzenie uniwersyteckich wspólnot, ceniących akademicką prawość i egzekwujące ją raczej jako normę społeczną aniżeli abstrakcyjną zasadę. Niniejszy artykuł przybliży historię oraz funkcjonowanie takich programów, przedstawia empiryczne uzasadnienie ich efektywności, prezentuje także studium przypadku w postaci studenckiego systemu honorowego na Uniwersytecie Marii Waszyngton (Fredericksburg, Virginia, Stany Zjednoczone).

Słowa kluczowe: akademicka prawość, studium przypadku, oszukiwanie, plagiat, kodeks moralny