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TOPICS IN THIS ISSUE:

13.7: The growing impact of “modified” honor codes

**KEY QUOTATION** (from Harvard College dean Jay M. Harris, summarized in *Harvard Magazine*):

“Even a modified honor code will not be a ‘panacea,’ and will not eliminate the need for some enforcement mechanism for ensuring that community standards are met. But, [Harris] continued, there is evidence that well-instituted honor codes do result in less cheating and in better student engagement with community standards and with learning.”

13.7 ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The growing impact of “modified” honor codes
The March-April 2013 issue of Harvard Magazine (HM) reported on Harvard’s ongoing response to an August 2012 incident in which “nearly half of the students enrolled in a spring 2012 government course had collaborated inappropriately on the take-home final examination.” According to the HM article, Jay M. Harris, dean of undergraduate education at Harvard College, told a February 5, 2013 faculty meeting that a college committee would soon “bring forth recommendations for ‘components of an honor code.’”

Here’s an excerpt from the HM account of Dean Harris’ remarks:

Updating [a prior] presentation on the Committee on Academic Integrity’s (CAI) “student-facing” and “faculty-facing” subcommittees, Harris said he expected to present formal recommendations . . . in March.

The committee . . . was established two and a half years ago, in light of concerns that—in a changing culture that includes rapidly evolving technological access to information—student attitudes toward intellectual property and collaboration had become disconnected from faculty expectations . . .

The CAI surveyed the literature and examined other schools’ practices, and aimed to shift attitudes and institutional practices at Harvard from policing student behavior and “surveillance,” as he termed it, to an environment of trust and community among teachers and students. More broadly, in an era when students may seem overly focused on “grades and brownie points,” Harris hoped it would be possible to help “reset” the relationship with students so that they would jointly focus with their teachers—as a shared community—on deep learning and academic achievement . . . To that end, the committee would bring forth recommendations for “components of an honor code.”

Such [honor] codes, [Harris] noted, are “a genus, not a species.” The core elements are students’ roles in developing and enforcing community norms—including participation in administering them (not a part of the Administrative Board’s processes now) . . .

Harris was careful to note that honor-code provisions requiring students to report on violations of community standards “don’t work” and accordingly will not be recommended. Honor-code institutions still have problems with cheating. Even a modified honor code will not be a “panacea,” and will not eliminate the need for some enforcement mechanism for ensuring that community standards are met. But, he continued, there is evidence that well-instituted honor codes do result
in less cheating and in better student engagement with community standards and with learning.

HM also reported on comments from Harvard President Drew Faust at the Harvard College faculty meeting. We think a question she posed about engagement in learning addresses an issue often overlooked in academic integrity programming:

How do we sustain the most constructive culture possible for learning? How do we help students realize the benefits of collaboration while also recognizing its appropriate limits? How do we create a climate that sets the highest expectations for our students, and at the same time affirms the norms we see as integral to the learning process? How do we help our students reconcile and balance the opportunities and demands they experience inside and outside the classroom? How do we—we who have devoted our lives to scholarship and teaching—how do we affirm and transmit the value—and the excitement—of learning for its own sake to our students in a world that increasingly urges them to think of their education in instrumental terms, urges them to focus on narrowly defined achievements and material outcomes? [italics added].

RESOURCES


"[W]e agree that traditional honor codes are no panacea or magic bullet, and we have said that they must be part of a broader ethical culture-building effort . . . [W]e [also] believe the overall body of evidence continues to support the effectiveness of honor code approaches for reducing academic dishonesty (p. 194).

"[T]he majority of studies [also] suggest that modified codes are associated with reduced cheating behavior” (p. 110) (italics added).


A survey conducted under the auspices of the Center for Academic Integrity in the 1999/2000 academic year helps explain the benefits of
honor codes -- even at larger campuses where academic dishonesty is often more common. Included in this sample were three colleges (including the University of Maryland at College Park) that have adopted what are known as "modified" honor codes. These modified codes -- adopted in recent years at a rapidly growing number of institutions -- differ from traditional codes in at least two ways: unproctored exams are used only at the instructor's option and students are generally not expected to report cheating they might observe. However, modified codes do call for significant student involvement in promoting academic integrity and in adjudicating allegations of academic dishonesty. They also impose strict sanctions for academic dishonesty (like suspensions or transcript notations), but do so in a context where education and prevention take priority over the threat of punishment alone.

Neither traditional nor modified honor codes eliminate all cheating, even serious cheating. However, the Center for Academic Integrity survey showed that only 23 percent of students at colleges with traditional honor codes reported one or more incidents of serious test or exam cheating in the past year, contrasted with 45 percent of students at colleges with no honor code. At the three modified honor code institutions in the study, 33 percent of the respondents self-reported an incident of serious test or exam cheating -- intermediate between the levels found on traditional honor code and no honor code campuses.


"It would be quite a study to go through the available record to identify all the places, times, and postures in which those who had known Lincoln in Indiana and in New Salem remembered him reading a book: reading while the horse rests at the end of a row, reading while walking down the street, reading under a tree, reading while others went to dances, reading with his legs up as high as his head, reading between customers in the post office, reading snatched at length on the counter of the store."

Engagement in learning and “Lincoln’s Melancholy”

‘The best thing for being sad,’ replied Merlyn . . . ‘is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails . . . You may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then--to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.’

**Engagement in learning can enhance a career**

From the "[Math Open Reference](https://www.mathopenref.com)" site:

At age forty, Abraham Lincoln studied Euclid for training in reasoning, and as a traveling lawyer on horseback, kept a copy of Euclid's Elements in his saddlebag. In his biography of Lincoln, his law partner Billy Herndon tells how late at night Lincoln would lie on the floor studying Euclid's geometry by lamplight. Lincoln's logical speeches and some of his phrases such as "dedicated to the proposition" in the [Gettysburg address](https://www.gettysburg.edu/gettysburg-address.html) are attributed to his reading of Euclid.

[Please click here for a related photograph and additional reading.](https://www.gettysburg.edu/gettysburg-address.html)

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