

HONOR

ENDURING PRINCIPLE, CHANGING TIMES

BY COY BAREFOOT

The student-run Honor System is at the heart of the Virginia experience. Through the years it has been described as the “most priceless of heritages,” a “fundamental cornerstone” and the “most unsailable of the University’s core values.” The Honor System makes possible a community of trust among students in which members are assumed to be men and women of integrity who never lie, cheat or steal—or tolerate such acts among their peers.

The history of honor at the University—a principle that’s evolved from a pledge to a code to a system—is a complex story. Over the years, thousands of U.Va. students have responded to the challenge of ensuring a strong sense of honor. It has not always been an easy endeavor, with debates and disagreements frequently stirring the waters.

It is widely believed that the murder of law professor John A. G. Davis on the Lawn by a student during a November 1840 uprising prompted the creation of an honor pledge two years later—a pledge that proved to be the seed of the Honor System we know today. Historic documents, however, tell a different story. A close reading of the faculty minutes from those years, in addition to student letters and diaries, does not reveal any connection between the murder and the Honor Code’s inception (except that Davis’ replacement proposed the pledge).

On a now historic date—July 4, 1842—the faculty agreed to the creation of an honor pledge requiring stu-

dents to affirm that they had neither given nor received aid on exams. The action addressed repeated reports that some students had been caught cheating. The new pledge would appeal to one’s honor, a principle already vital to many students well before 1842. The link between the murder of Davis and what would become the University Honor System appears to be a 20th-century narrative grafted onto past events.

It can be argued that the beginning of the Honor System at the University dates rather to March 1825, when the first student had his name entered in the matriculation book. By entering his name, the student pledged to support the University’s principles, ideals and regulations—rules that forbade lying to professors and cheating on tests.

More important than the origin of the Honor System, however, is its survival into the 21st century—the triumph of ideals over the tribulations of changing times. Perhaps most challenging today is the fact that many students, for various reasons, appear reluctant to report violations of the Honor Code. In a sense, recent surveys indicate it has become something of a *dishonor*—or among some students to uphold the Honor Code by informing on a classmate. To be sure, all who care deeply about the Honor System at the University understand that there are formidable hurdles before it. But if the past is any guide, students will always be willing to step forward and provide the leadership necessary not only to keep honor alive at U.Va. but also to leave it stronger for those who follow.



HONOR

TIMELINE



1825 The University of Virginia opened to students on March 7. By adding their names to the matriculation book, the young men pledged to abide by the rules of the University, which stipulated that no student would lie to a professor or cheat on any exams.



1836 The first recorded instance of a U.Va. student invoking a sense of honor occurred during the rebellion of the Student Military Company in November. The 63 members, enraged by an effort to get the group to turn over its guns, rioted for three days until the state militia took control of the Grounds. During the revolt, the students sent word to the faculty that “every member of the company pledges his honor to stand by his comrades.”

1840 During the commemoration of the anniversary of the 1836 student rebellion, a student, Joseph G. Semmes of Georgia, shot and killed law professor John A. G. Davis in front of his home, Pavilion X, on Nov. 12. Davis was replaced on the faculty by Henry St. George Tucker.



Professor John A. G. Davis

1841 On March 2, the faculty resolved to amend the rules governing exams to include “no student shall bring into the lecture room at the hour appointed for the intermediate and final examinations in any of the Schools, a portfolio, blank or printed books or make use of any other means of concealing notes in evasion of the laws which prescribe the mode of examination.”

1842 In response to continued reports of cheating on exams, Tucker proposed at a July 4 faculty committee meeting that students henceforth attach a certificate to all exams confirming that, on their honor, they did not receive any type of assistance. The historic proposal was immediately adopted. No records suggest that Tucker’s proposal stemmed from the murder of Davis two years before. All existing rules against cheating remained on the books.



1851 On June 18, the first recorded honor trial concluded with the expulsion of medical student R.S.F. Peete. Charged with cheating by several classmates, Peete was found guilty by an all-faculty committee and dismissed. The faculty concluded that leaving an exam room and consulting textbooks “was in direct violation of the published rules of the institution.”

1865-75 In the decade or so following the Civil War, the honor pledge proved to be the seed of a broader honor code that informed student behavior outside the classroom.



1895 As organized sports, especially football, became a powerful force at the University, some students worried that athletic competition was bad for honor. As one wrote, “This same honor system is but a vague and shadowy kind of thing and is frequently difficult to apply to special cases. . . . Those who have thought over the matter are inclined

to the opinion that . . . the rise of athletic spirit has been accompanied by a proportionate falling off from an ethical standpoint.”

1912 Student Churchill Humphrey proposed a new U.Va. student government with a permanent Honor Committee consisting of the student presidents of the University’s various schools. His proposal was subsequently adopted.



1917 Amid criticism that the Honor System had become cumbersome, members of the student body

voted 132 to 90 to make the following changes: to record all proceedings of the Honor Committee; to notify the registrar, faculty and alumni of committee decisions; and to make public the names of anyone dismissed by the committee. The reform was decried by many alumni who preferred previous practices.

1926 In a case that generated considerable controversy, the Honor Committee expelled two students in January. One had answered “present” for a friend during class roll call; the second (the absent friend, who was late returning from Christmas break) had asked him to do it.

1929 In an effort to counter complaints from state leaders of public drunkenness among students, the *College Topics* newspaper funded a documentary, “The Highest Degree,” about the Honor System.



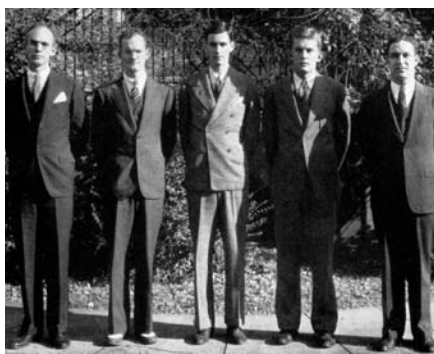
1932 The Honor Committee expelled a student for smoking. The young man had signed a pledge as a member of the track team stating that he would not drink, smoke or have sexual intercourse during the track season. The student quit the team, however, and believed it was acceptable to smoke again. Despite the protests of numerous students, faculty members and deans, the

committee found the student guilty. “A breach of any pledge, even though it relates to the most trivial subject, is an offense against the Honor System,” the committee said.

1934 The Honor Committee held what would be its last open trial until 1975.



1934 With Prohibition lifted and state-run Alcoholic Beverage Control stores opening in Charlottesville, the Honor Committee agreed not to pursue any case in which an underage student lied about his age to buy alcohol. That ruling was reversed in 1956 and reversed again in 1969. The Honor Committee currently does not take an official stance on whether the use of fake IDs by underage students to obtain alcohol constitutes an honor offense; such instances are handled on a case-by-case basis.



1938 Honor Committee

1938 Student leaders ruled that women would not be allowed to serve on the Honor Committee, despite repeated appeals by female students in the School of Education. (This policy was overturned during the 1970s after women were admitted to the College of Arts & Sciences.)



1941 In January, the Student Senate passed a resolution advising the Honor Committee to end its jurisdiction over athletic training rules and leave such authority to the coaches.

1943 According to *College Topics*, nearly four-fifths of the entering first-year class (many of them U.S. Navy cadets assigned to train and study at the University before being stationed elsewhere) failed to sign pledges to uphold the Honor Code. During the war years, many of those students apparently felt more loyalty to their fellow soldiers as servicemen than they did to the University as students.

1943 On Nov. 30, Honor Committee members met with naval cadets to discuss whether false mustering (when someone falsely indicates a member of the mustered unit is present) should come under the committee’s jurisdiction.

1943 On Dec. 16, *College Topics* published the results of a poll of 761 students, who voted overwhelmingly to keep mustering violations out of the Honor Code.

College Topics

1944 On June 6—D-Day—a headline in *College Topics* announced, “Committee Bans False Musters.” Despite the results of the student opinion poll the year before, the Honor Committee informed the University community that it considered lying to be a violation of the Honor System, and thus made clear its jurisdiction over false musters by naval students.



1945 Students returning after the war elected the first student government in three years. The Honor Committee had assumed the duties of student government during the war.

1950 Alumnus and law professor T. Munford Boyd told first-year students in a speech his definition of the Honor System and proposed a historical link between the murder of Davis in 1840 and the creation of the honor pledge in 1842.

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

1951 The Honor Code received favorable coverage in the September issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

1953 The Honor Committee published its instructions to new faculty on the application of the Honor System. The list of recommended procedures stated: “If in the course of grading papers, a professor should become suspicious of the work of any student, he should immediately call upon several of the student’s colleagues and have them review the paper in question.”



1954 On May 4, the Honor Committee announced changes to its procedures, including creating a counselor or system for each department whereby students would receive additional information about the Honor System; not per-

mitting parents of an accused to attend honor trials; and specifying that every accused person would be assigned an adviser to help them navigate the process in hopes of ensuring a fair trial.



1955 At a September honor orientation meeting for incoming students, Honor Committee chairman Howard Gill said that he believed lying to buy alcohol at an ABC store was a breach of the Honor Code. This view

was contrary to a committee policy that had been in place since Prohibition was lifted, and it prompted the *Cavalier Daily* to call for a clarification. In an open letter to the student body a few weeks later, Gill made known for the first time that the committee as a whole shared this view.



1955 The Bad Check Committee announced in December that it faced something of a crisis with nearly \$250 unpaid in bad checks passed by students and less than \$100 left in the fund to cover them. A few

weeks later, the Bad Check Committee announced that “a student failing to rectify a bad check within two weeks of notification by the committee automatically must appear before the Honor Committee.”



1956 In an April 26 referendum, nursing students voted 143 to 7 to join the University Honor System. They were represented on the all-male Honor Committee by the representative from the medical school.

THE CAVALIER DAILY

1958 Editors of the *Cavalier Daily* questioned the vitality of the Honor System. “Is honor at Virginia a reality or is the Honor System a great hollow shell which had its birth in Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, Atlanta and the old South, and whose entrails disappeared with Lee’s surrender at Appomattox?”

1960 Alumnus Bernard Chamberlain addressed incoming students about the Honor System and warned of a growing moral laxity that threatened to lower moral standards and cripple the Honor System.

1967 In March, a *Cavalier Daily* editorial read in part, “We do not know whether the spirit [of honor] can thrive in the University of tomorrow, so large and so diverse and so wrapped up in the exigencies of the modern world.”

1969 The Honor System was revised to cover only violations that occurred within the boundaries of Albemarle County and Charlottesville or “wherever a student represented him/herself as a student of the University of Virginia.”

1969 Honor Committee Chairman Whittington W. Clement was quoted in the *Cavalier Daily* as saying, “With an enlarged enrollment and with the more diversified academic programs and student body, it is increasingly difficult for the Honor Committee to present a thorough orientation program to all entering students.” He also said, “Last year the Honor Committee, after its evaluation, concluded that the student body did not feel that lying for the purchasing of liquor should be considered a dishonorable act that warranted permanent dismissal. Since it is the student body which determines whether an act constitutes violation, and since last year’s committee read public sentiment to have been against the regulation, it cannot be considered a violation.”



1969 During Student Council elections, a referendum was held on the following question: “Do you feel the

principles and provisions of the Honor System should apply to the faculty and administration as well as to students?” The nonbinding referendum received 1,779 votes in favor and 941 against.

1970 “It is only a matter of time before the Honor System is taken to a federal court,” American Civil Liberties Union attorney John Lowe told the *Cavalier*

A PLEDGE IS BORN

At a historic meeting in 1842 that laid the groundwork for the University’s Honor System, the faculty adopted a resolution stating: “Resolved, that in all future written examinations for distinction and other honors of the University each candidate shall attach to the written answers presented by him on such examination a certificate in the following words— I, A.B., do hereby certify that I have derived no assistance during the time of this examination from any sources whatever, whether oral, written or in print in giving the above answers.”

PLEDGE
ON MY HONOR AS A
STUDENT, I HAVE
NEITHER GIVEN NOR
RECEIVED AID ON THIS
ASSIGNMENT/EXAM.
WRITE OUT AND SIGN

Daily. Lowe, then counsel for the Student Council, recommended using actual attorneys in honor trials. He also told the newspaper: “When transcripts are sent to other schools where a dismissed student is attempting to gain admittance, there is a note attached which indicates that the student was dismissed, but it does not say for an honor violation, according to the Office of the Registrar.”



1971 In February, the Honor Committee voted to allow professional attorneys to advise students during trials. Many alumni viewed this as an unfortunate decision that initiated an age of litigation challenging the authority of the Honor Committee and the effectiveness of the Honor System.

In March, a first-year student was dismissed for stealing soda cans from a vending machine. In response to public outcry, the Honor Committee nullified its verdict the next day. The now legendary “Coke Case” kicked off an ongoing debate of the appropriateness of the single sanction.



1972 In the first of nearly a dozen referenda held over the next 20 years, a majority of voting students upheld the single sanction for violation of the Honor Code.

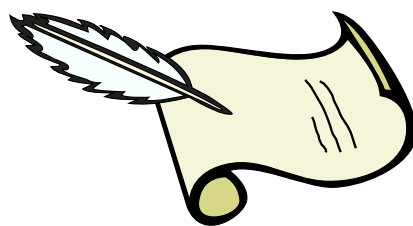


WHAT CONSTITUTES AN HONOR OFFENSE?

When presented with a charge of lying, cheating or stealing by a student, the Honor Committee now considers three criteria to establish a breach of the Honor Code: the act itself (was the act of lying, cheating or stealing committed); intent (was the act committed willfully or intentionally); and non-triviality (would open toleration of such an act impair the community of trust sufficiently to warrant permanent dismissal from the University).



1975 Lawyers with the American Civil Liberties Union challenged the Honor System’s constitutionality. In response to these and other legal challenges, the Honor Committee held its first open trial since 1934.



1977 Students ratified the first written constitution of the Honor System, detailing the rights and responsibilities of everyone involved in upholding the Honor Code at the University. The student body continues to have the final word, through referenda, on changes to that constitution.

1980 A referendum was passed allowing accused students to opt for a jury composed of both randomly selected peers and members of the Honor Committee. Ten years later, a similar referendum gave students the choice to opt for a jury composed entirely of randomly selected peers.



1984 In November, basketball standout Olden Polynice—despite reportedly admitting to turning in someone else’s paper as his own—was cleared of honor charges. Testimony from Coach Terry Holland that the athletic department had put undue pres-

sure on Polynice is alleged to have swayed the jury that the athlete’s conduct didn’t meet the “reprehensible” criterion in the honor constitution. Shortly after the highly publicized trial, a student referendum approved changing the standard for an honor violation from “reprehensible” to “serious.”



1986 In May, the incoming chairman of the Honor Committee reported to a committee of the Board of Visitors that the primary cause of difficulty with the Honor System was the increasing diversity of the student body. According to a later study, the chairman said that “non-mainstream students had become primary targets for honor investigations. Athletes, particularly black athletes, were investigated at a significantly higher rate than students in other categories.”



1987 The Honor Committee created a panel of student investigators to help prepare facts for trials. By 1993, randomly selected investigators were replaced with honor advisers. The influence of the Investigative Panel, or I-Panel, grew stronger as it determined whether a case should be brought to trial.

THE CAVALIER DAILY

1988 The *Cavalier Daily* newspaper reported that “statistics for the last year show that 29.7 percent of honor accusations are made against black students, a number which is disproportionately higher than the approximately eight percent of blacks attending the University.”



1991 For the first time in the University’s history, the Student Council president and the chair of the Honor Committee were African-American students.



1991 In response to concerns that the Honor System was biased against African-American students, especially athletes of color, an outside consultant was hired to examine the issue. The study, by the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research, read in part: “We found it helpful to distinguish between the Honor *Spirit* and the Honor *System*. The Honor *Spirit* places the value of honesty as the keystone of the U.Va. community ... The core values of this Honor *Spirit* were found to be solidly embraced by the community.” The study also concluded: “Racial issues that find expression in the Honor System are not issues caused by, or even primarily related to, the Honor System. Rather, they are community-wide issues that find visible expression through the Honor System ... It is also worth mentioning what should be an obvious fact: Few institutions of U.Va.’s size even try to have an Honor System.”



1992 Student Christopher Leggett was found guilty by a jury of peers of cheating on a computer science exam and expelled. His request for a new trial was denied. Leggett’s attorneys questioned due process and bargained successfully for a new trial, which was granted in the summer of 1994 after the administration determined that his case had been mishandled. In a surprise reversal, Leggett was subsequently found not guilty. His case garnered considerable media attention and criticism among alumni and students.

1999 After an extensive investigation, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights determined that the Honor System does not violate the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



2001 In late April, using a computer program he wrote to detect plagiarism, U.Va. physics professor Louis Bloomfield discovered that the term papers of 122 of his students had suspicious similarities. According to Honor Committee statistics, 157 cases were ultimately processed as a result of Bloomfield’s discovery. Bloomfield later called the honor cases “time sinks” leading to “careericide.”

2001 A survey underscored the challenge of student involvement. Of the students who said they were aware of an actual honor violation, 95.4 percent said they did not report it or initiate charges.

2004 In a spring referendum, 59 percent of students responding advised the Honor Committee to investigate a multiple-sanction system.

2005 Two student groups—Hoos Against Single Sanction and Students for the Preservation of Honor—are engaged in policy discussions regarding proposed changes to the Honor Constitution.



2005 The Faculty Senate voted unanimously to recommend reinstatement of the non-toleration clause that requires students to report honor violations that they have knowledge of—or be liable for an honor violation themselves. The Honor Committee did not adopt the recommendation.



2006 In November, the U.Va. Center for Survey Research released a comprehensive survey of the faculty and teaching assistants on behalf of the Honor Committee. The survey revealed “both support for the Honor System and a significant level of opposition to it.”

2007 In February, the Honor Committee passed a “transformation resolution” that tightened the schedule of investigations, charges and trials.

In March, a historically slim majority upheld the single sanction in University-wide referenda that proposed changes to the Honor Constitution.



Today The Honor Committee includes 23 representatives from U.Va.’s 11 schools. They are assisted by three paid and nearly 200 volunteer support officers. ■



Video on uvamagazine.org

A more detailed Honor timeline is also available online.