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Honour codes

> **Overview**
> • Honour codes are intended to promote a commitment to honesty among students.
> • Research shows codes can make a difference.
> • To promote codes, students should be aware of them, hear them portrayed in positive terms, understand how they work, see peers respect the codes, and regularly follow them personally.[1]

Cheating: the problem

At a small US college, a former student, Steve, set up an essay-writing service, quite openly, advertising himself as "Dr. Research." Apparently he wanted to take revenge on the college for the way he had been treated. He wrote lots of essays to order; some students only wanted a B for their work, because an A would be suspicious. Steve became so good at his job that he was making twice as much as a full professor and wrote a total of 10% of all the essays written on campus.

Why wasn't anything done about Steve's activities? The college depended on attracting students whose parents were willing to pay high fees. The students wanted to have a good time. Most were quite capable of writing adequate essays but preferred to spend their time in other ways. Cracking down on

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Steve would have alienated students and threatened the college's finances.[2]

The case of Dr Research is an extreme case of a common problem: cheating in US schools and universities.[3] The problem is also prevalent in other countries.

How can you find out whether students have been cheating? One way is to catch them, for example exchanging answers during exams. But detection catches only a small proportion of cheating. More reliable is simply asking students about their cheating, using questionnaires that ensure anonymity. Of course some students may not want to admit cheating even anonymously, because it means consciously acknowledging their own dishonesty. So the figures are probably underestimates. In any case, they are sizeable, and alarming to many: in 1993, half of US students surveyed admitted copying from other students in examinations.[4]

There have been some prominent scandals when cheating rings have been exposed. In one instance in the 1990s, two dozen students were expelled from the US Naval Academy after an electrical engineering examination paper was stolen and more than a hundred students were implicated.[5] Cheating at military

2 Robert S. Wolk, "'Dr. Research': a quick fix for plagiarists," *Journal of Information Ethics,* 2(1), Spring 1993, 63–71.

3 Donald L. McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino, "What we know about cheating in college," *Change,* January/February 1996, 29–33. On cheating more generally, see David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2004).

4 McCabe and Trevino, "What we know about cheating in college," 31.

5 Jeffrey Gantar and Tom Patten, *A Question of Honor: The Cheating Scandal that Rocked Annapolis and a Midshipman Who Decided to Tell the Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

academies is especially disturbing, or at least newsworthy, because these institutions are supposed to nurture future leaders.

These days it's possible to buy essays online, written to order so they receive a clean bill of health on text-matching services such as Turnitin used by many colleges to check for plagiarism. In fact, there are so many essay sites that the biggest challenge is choosing the best one.

I think most students are honest most of the time, doing the work required and even learning something along the way. However, there is quite a lot of cheating too. There's a whole movement of staff and scholars concerned about "academic integrity," whose main focus is student plagiarism and what to do about it.

However, there's a big difference between attitudes among teachers and students. Wendy Sutherland-Smith interviewed and held discussions among teachers concerning plagiarism — copying without acknowledgement from published sources or another student's work — and found, not surprisingly, most viewed this as a very serious violation of ethical behaviour. But most students were not so concerned, thinking it wasn't a big deal and that severe penalties were unfair.[6]

In some student circles, good students are expected to help their friends, for example by allowing them to copy assignments or answers on exams. A good student who refuses to go along with this is seen as a spoilsport. In such circumstances, cheating has two sides: gaining unfair assistance and giving it.

Given that cheating seems fairly common, what can be done about it? One option is an honour system. The basic idea is that students pledge to be honest: they are on their honour. Honour systems are intended to promote honesty, most

6 Wendy Sutherland-Smith, *Plagiarism, the Internet and Student Learning: Improving Academic Integrity* (London: Routledge, 2008).

commonly to encourage students not to cheat. They rely on voluntary compliance by students, not intensive monitoring by teachers.

What is the prospect of an honour system working? This would require students on an entire campus following a moral expectation to be honest. If cheating is rife in most schools and campuses, at least within certain student circles, how can a university create a different set of values?

Rice

I first learned about an honour code in September 1965, when I went to Houston, Texas to study physics at Rice University. I don't remember a whole lot of detail from my four years at Rice, but the honour code made a big impression.

Like all new students, I arrived a week before classes began. There were lots of activities to help us settle into life on campus — nearly all freshmen lived in colleges on the campus itself. One of the activities that week was learning about the honour system. We were told about its history and its operation. The most important aspect was that on all important assignments and exams, we had to sign a statement saying "I have neither given nor received any aid on this assignment." Furthermore, we were required to report any honour system violations by other students that we observed. At the end of the week we were given a short quiz on the system.

This initial training was important, but there had to be more to the honour system. One important thing was history. The honour system had been introduced when Rice took its first students in 1912.

Rice is a private university, set up with a bequest from a wealthy businessman named William Marsh Rice. It has always been exclusive, with a small enrolment and high standards. It

had no tuition fee until 1965 — the year I started — and even then the fee was considerably less than most other private universities. When I was there, just 550 new undergraduates were accepted each year.

Most Rice undergraduates had been top-performing students in high school. Many had been top of their class. Did many of them cheat in high school? I don't know, but there was a temptation at Rice. Many students who had been academic stars in high school became, at Rice, ordinary performers. Instead of getting straight As, they were getting Bs and Cs or, in the Rice numerical grading system in which 5 was a fail and the number 1 was the top grade, they were getting 2s and 3s.

The honour system seemed to infiltrate everyone's way of thinking. The training in the orientation week was only the beginning. Every assignment we had to sign the statement "I have neither given or received any aid on this work." But it wasn't the signing alone that made the difference. It was the fact that everyone else was committed to the code.

One of my roommates admitted that he had cheated in high school, where he had been a top student. At Rice, though, he said he would rather fail than cheat. He was working really hard and getting ordinary grades, just passing in some cases. This comment stuck in my memory: it signified how powerful a code could be in changing someone's behaviour.

During my time at Rice, significant changes were made in assessments, allowing flexibility for students. Students could choose the time and day they took final exams.[7] So I picked times that enabled me to recover from one three-hour exam and prepare for the next one. This meant that in the exam room, there

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7 This option is no longer available, though take-home exams are still used frequently. I thank Hilary Baker-Jennings, Chair of the Rice Honor Council, for this information.

were students taking exams from completely different courses. Each student pledged not to reveal anything about the exam to any other student. I remember when my roommate and I were in the same class. He took the exam a few days before me — and told me absolutely nothing about it.

We also had take-home exams. We could take it any time we chose over a number of days and we were on our honour to spend no more than three hours on the exam. One year I took a class in quantum mechanics and we had a take-home exam during the semester. One of the questions was really hard — I couldn't make any progress on the calculation. After marking all the papers, our teacher reported that not a single student in the class had solved the problem — and this was a class for physics majors, with lots of top students. The teacher said he should have told us that he had assumed that one of the quantum numbers was zero, which made the problem much easier.

This was a vivid illustration of everyone's commitment to the honour code. We had been on our honour not to look at any references and to spend only three hours on the exam. By going to the library and finding some advanced calculations, we might have been able to make more headway in solving the problem — but no one did this. We all chose to submit our exam papers having failed to solve it.

I'm sure that some cheating did occur. However, it was risky because so many students subscribed to the code.

At a lot of universities, disciplinary tribunals are run by academics and students are treated with kid gloves. When students say they didn't mean to copy because they didn't know it was wrong, they are often let off with a reprimand or a fail for the course. Although administrations say that cheating is dealt with severely, in practice very few students suffer the ultimate penalty of being expelled. This is fair. When lots of students

cheat, it's unfair that just a few, those who happen to be caught, are treated harshly while so many others avoid any punishment whatsoever.

At Rice, alleged violations of the code were dealt with by a panel run by students, and the outcomes of panel deliberations were reported, though without names. When students run disciplinary panels, they tend to be less tolerant of cheating, because they see how unfair it is for honest students. This partly explains why the panel at Rice was so tough. The other part is that when most students followed the honour code, those who did not were especially culpable for letting everyone else down: they dishonoured the code and their fellow students.

McCabe and Trevino

Donald McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino have surveyed tens of thousands of students at higher education institutions in the US, from small colleges to multi-campus universities, asking them whether they cheat. McCabe and Trevino then look at whether there's an honour code. What they find is that codes do have an effect, even at large universities where many students are part-time and don't live on campus. A code that is taken seriously is linked to less cheating.

McCabe and Trevino say two elements are critical to the success of codes. "First, a campus must communicate to its students that academic integrity is a major institutional priority."[8] By "a campus" they mean the leaders of the institution, for the example the president. In other words, the most powerful and

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8 These and the following quotes are taken from Donald McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino, "Honesty and honor codes," *Academe,* 88(1), January-February 2002, 37–41.

authoritative figures must be seen to be taking the issue seriously.

The second crucial element is that students must participate "in campus judicial or hearing bodies that review alleged infringements of the honor code." When students are involved, this gives the code credibility in another way: students know that honest classmates will not be easy on cheating. It's a way of ensuring that the official rhetoric has some substance.

These two features are exactly what I experienced at Rice. There was no disagreement about the honour code — it was promoted and respected from the top down.

McCabe and Trevino make some other observations based on their research. They say "Simply having an honor code means little if students don't know about it. It must be introduced to new students and made a topic of ongoing campus dialogue." Namely, put the code on the agenda of every student.

In their article, they make just one reference to Rice: "Members of the student honor committee at Rice University orient new faculty to the student honor code and keep department chairs apprised of any changes in the committee's emphasis." I don't remember hearing about that when I was at Rice, but then I was never involved with the honour committee. There was bound to be a lot happening behind the scenes.

McCabe and Trevino conclude their article with this comment: "Moreover, the greatest benefit of a culture of integrity may not be reduced student cheating. Instead, it may be the lifelong benefit of learning the value of living in a community of trust." I can relate to that. The experience of Rice's honour code stayed with me long after I'd forgotten most of what I learned in the classroom.

In Australia, no university is well known for using an honour code: if codes are used anywhere, they receive little

publicity. As a result, few people understand how effective a code can be. When I mention the possibility, it's apparent that there's little understanding. My experience makes the possibility vivid; for others, it's merely hypothetical.

What were the things that made Rice's code so effective, at least for me? It is easy to spell out connections to the five methods regularly found useful for promoting good things, as discussed in chapter 1.

Awareness Everyone knew about the code. We were given a solid introduction in our first week and then it was repeatedly brought to our attention every time we did an assignment and signed the pledge.

Valuing The code was presented to us as something highly worthwhile, indeed as a valuable Rice tradition that set the university above and apart from most others. We took pride in participating in an honour system.

Understanding We knew how the code worked. It was quite simple: because everyone, or nearly everyone, was committed to the code, cheating hardly ever occurred, and that meant honest students benefited.

Endorsement The code was supported by everyone we respected. That included Rice's founders and our teachers but, more significantly for new students, the students from higher years. Living in colleges, we met students from upper years on a daily basis. If they had treated the code with disdain or as a joke, we would have done the same. But they were deadly serious about it — and so, soon enough, we were too.

Action We learned to operate using the code and before long it became just part of the landscape, as routine as doing assignments. It became a habit. The external conditions supported this: commitment by others and regular reinforcement. It was far easier to follow the code than to try to cheat.

The Rice honour code operated on two levels: individual commitment and collective participation. Individuals became committed through the five methods: awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action. Each of these depended on nearly everyone else also being committed. Collective participation provided the supportive environment that made being committed seem entirely natural. A person who sometimes cheated who entered the Rice environment became — like my roommate — an honest member of the community.

The five methods are also apparent in the research by McCabe and Trevino. My experience was typical.

The usual idea of honesty is that it's a matter of individual integrity. If people are honest, they'll do the right thing, but monitoring and penalties are needed to catch and discipline cheaters. The experience with honour codes shows the weakness of this picture.

No doubt some students who came to Rice had a stronger prior commitment to honesty than others. Some had cheated in high school; others hadn't. In any case, the low level of student cheating at Rice can't possibly be explained by individual honesty. The key was a culture of integrity that enveloped nearly every student on campus and shaped their behaviour. In other words, developing a habit of being honest is just as much a matter of culture, of collective behaviour, as it is a matter of individual commitment.

McCabe and Trevino emphasise this strongly: "Creating a culture of academic integrity takes years to achieve and demands the commitment of all members of the campus community. Once attained, such a culture requires constant attention and renewal."[9]

A culture of honesty is hard to develop and maintain because there are strong contrary pressures, namely the incentives to get ahead in a competitive system. An honour code is a way to sustain a culture of honesty. The key is ensuring that the environment for each student is one that encourages honesty.

If honesty is a habit, then individuals need to learn the habit and the best support for this is everyone around you having the same habit. You just go with the flow and reap the benefits. However, someone has to be doing the maintenance work to keep the system going. That turns out to be the way it works for all sorts of good things.

Complications and qualifications

So far I've presented the story of honour codes via the example of Rice and with a few quotes from a summary article by Donald McCabe and Linda Trevino. Delving into the research on the topic gives support for this picture but, as is usual in research, there are all sorts of complications and qualifications. McCabe and Trevino, occasionally with collaborators, have studied honour codes for years, and cite many earlier studies. In one of their key articles, published in 1993, they examine honour codes along with "other contextual influences," in other words factors that influence student behaviour aside from their personal commitment to honesty. Based on a review of research in the area, they propose a series of hypotheses, such as "Academic

9 Ibid.

dishonesty will be inversely related to the perceived certainty of being reported by a peer": they expect that when a student thinks a classmate will turn them in, they will be less likely to cheat.[10]

Most of the hypotheses seem obvious enough; the point of McCabe and Trevino's study was to actually obtain evidence to test them. They surveyed over 6000 students from 31 US higher education institutions, some with honour codes and some without, and statistically analysed the data to test their hypotheses. Students were asked whether they had cheated themselves, whether they knew about cheating by other students, and a host of other questions. Students responded to the survey anonymously — what student is likely to openly admit to cheating? Indeed, some students might not be willing to admit to cheating even on an anonymous questionnaire; McCabe and Trevino note this and other possible limitations of the survey.

They found that students at institutions with codes were less likely to cheat. Why not? Their most important finding was that "Peers' behavior had by far the strongest influence on academic dishonesty"[11]: if fellow students cheat, you are more likely to as well. This suggests, according to McCabe and Trevino, that students learn to cheat by observing others and that when others cheat, this makes cheating more acceptable.[12]

The authors also noted that "understanding and acceptance of academic integrity policies has the strongest association with students' perceptions of their peers' behavior."[13] This means that

if there's an honour code and students understand and accept it, there will be less cheating. If even just a few students are influenced by the honour code, this has a spin-off effect on other students, because when their fellow students are seen as honest, they are less likely to cheat themselves. Just as cheating leads to more cheating by example and setting a norm, so honesty leads to more honesty.

McCabe and Trevino's research is compatible with each of the five methods for doing good things better.

> *Awareness* Greater student awareness of academic integrity policies reduces cheating.
> *Valuing* Students value learning in a culture of honesty which gives them self-respect and pride in their institution.
> *Understanding* Greater student understanding of academic integrity policies reduces cheating.
> *Endorsement* The behaviour of fellow students provides the most powerful endorsement of honesty — or cheating.
> *Action* Behaving honestly builds the habit for future honesty.

One quote sums up most of these points: "programs aimed at distributing, explaining, and gaining student and faculty acceptance of academic integrity policies may be particularly useful."[14] Actually, McCabe and Trevino don't directly discuss the point about behaviour building an honesty habit, but their findings are compatible with it.

Quite revealing are quotes from students asked why they didn't cheat.

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10 Donald L. McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino, "Academic dishonesty: honor codes and other contextual influences," *Journal of Higher Education,* 64 (5), September-October 1993, 522-538, at 527.

11 Ibid., 532.

12 Ibid., 533.

13 Ibid., 532.

14 Ibid., 533–534.

• "I like the respect I get at [the institution] and wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that"

• "Peer pressure — you would feel very embarrassed if other students saw it"

• "as for cheating on a test, it's socially unacceptable"

• "I did many of these 'academic dishonesty' things in high school — but not since arriving at [the institution] — the atmosphere is one of respect for the student — and so I have respect for the system"[15]

McCabe, Trevino and their collaborator Ken Butterfield have followed up with further studies that support these basic findings. For example, they compare the effect of traditional honour codes, most commonly found in small institutions where most students live on campus, like Rice, with the effect of modified, less comprehensive honour codes instituted at larger institutions with less campus cohesion. Their conclusion is that modified codes can reduce cheating compared to places with no code at all, but not as much as traditional codes.[16]

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15 Ibid., 534–535.

16 Donald L. McCabe, Linda Klebe Trevino and Kenneth D. Butterfield, "Honor codes and other contextual influences on academic integrity: a replication and extension to modified honor code settings," *Research in Higher Education,* 43 (3), June 2002, 357–378. See also, for example, Donald L. McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino, "Individual and contextual influences on academic dishonesty: a multicampus investigation," *Research in Higher Education,* 38 (3), 1997, 379–396; Donald L. McCabe, Kenneth D. Butterfield and Linda Klebe Trevino, "Faculty and academic integrity: the influence of current honor codes and past honor code experiences," *Research in Higher Education,* 44 (3), June 2003, 367–385.

It's worth looking at studies by other investigators. Teresa Hall and George Kuh carried out a study of the effect of honour codes using several research methods: interviews with students, focus groups (sitting in with groups of students discussing targeted topics) and analysis of documents, with nine readings of the interview transcripts looking for themes and testing emerging categories. Hall and Kuh studied three large state institutions and concluded that honour codes were "only a mild deterrent to academic dishonesty." They say a code on its own is not enough to ensure integrity. Most students were aware of it but not enough of them properly understood it or accepted its values. Hall and Kuh say that "An academic honor code will not have the intended effect without the endorsement of and widespread support by the faculty."[17] So, although Hall and Kuh are a bit more sceptical about the effect of a code than McCabe and Trevino, they point to the same factors in ensuring its effectiveness: awareness, valuing, understanding and endorsement.

To gain a greater understanding of codes, it is worth seeing what critics say. There are plenty of people who don't think codes are worth bothering with or that they won't work — otherwise nearly every institution would be instituting them. I'm interested in critics who are well informed about codes and their impact and yet remain sceptical. One such critic is Gary J. Niels, who wrote a report on honour codes, with special attention to US secondary schools.[18] He starts out by referring to evidence that

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17 Teresa L. Hall and George D. Kuh, "Honor among students: academic integrity and honor codes at state-assisted universities," *NASPA Journal,* 36 (1), Fall 1998, 2–17, at pp. 2 and 13.

18 Gary J. Niels, *Is the Honor Code a Solution to the Cheating Epidemic?,* 1996, reproduced by the Educational Resource Information Service, ED 423 191, SO 028 965.

there is a vast amount of student cheating. He says "it became apparent from my studies that even though most students believed that cheating was wrong, cheating behavior was often induced by contextual factors."[19] Trying to promote honesty in individuals, for example through moral education, was not likely to succeed because of outside influences on the individual. Niels says "'fear of failure' and 'parents demanding good grades' were consistently scored by students among the top five reasons for cheating."[20]

Much of what Niels says is compatible with the studies by McCabe and Trevino and by Hall and Kuh. Indeed, Niels cites McCabe's work. However, Niels, rather than focussing on the successes of honour codes where they exist, instead points to their limitations at getting to the roots of cheating. He says "To view a traditional honor code as a panacea to the problem of cheating is to underestimate the causes of cheating behavior," which are "complex and multifaceted."[21] Niels advocates reviewing academic policies that foster competition and promoting educational reform that fosters students' commitment to learning.

Actually, McCabe, Trevino and others supportive of honour codes do not see them as panaceas — they are well aware of their limitations, but nonetheless see them as worthwhile. Furthermore, they would endorse Niels' emphasis on contextual factors influencing cheating; after all, an honour code itself is a contextual factor. McCabe and Trevino's 1993 paper is titled "Academic dishonesty: honor codes and other contextual

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19 Ibid., 6.

20 Ibid., 10.

21 Ibid., 40.

influences"[22] and several later papers include similar phrasing. My guess is that they would support Niels' call to develop policies that promote learning rather than competition.

These supporters and critics of honour codes agree on the importance of contextual factors — they just disagree on the relative importance of honour codes within the panoply of contextual factors. Therefore, it's intriguing to imagine an educational institution that doesn't bother with contextual factors and instead puts trust in finding honest students. The first task is to identify students who actually are honest. Usually there's no direct evidence of a person's honesty, just testimony from the person — which might well be self-serving — and their teachers and others. Far more revealing would be experiments that test honesty, for example giving someone an opportunity to cheat. However, such experiments probably would be considered unethical and if the student knew such tests existed the results would be compromised. The upshot is that there's no easy way, with standard selection processes, to identify honest students.

Set that aside and imagine further an institution able to pick only those students who had been honest previously. Would this be a guarantee of future honesty? Hardly, if temptations were too great. Imagine that the answer sheet for an exam was accidentally emailed to students. Honest students would refuse to read it, but if a few succumbed to temptation, aced the exam and teachers did nothing about the inequity, others might soon decide to take advantage of similar opportunities. This scenario is based on the assumption that students are passive. One obvious response would be for them to tell the teacher; another would be to protest about other students having an unfair advantage. With these responses, we move from individual honesty to contextual

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22 McCabe and Trevino, "Academic dishonesty."

factors. McCabe and Trevino emphasise the importance of teachers' commitment to honesty — if the teachers don't care, as in this scenario, then students' personal commitments are undermined. When students report problems to teachers, that's exactly what honour codes are aiming for, namely an attempt to bring others into the issue.

The conclusion from this hypothetical scenario is that relying entirely on personal honesty is deeply flawed because there's no easy way to identify honest applicants and the culture might undermine their commitment anyway. An analogy to the strategy of recruiting honest students would be a strategy of recruiting personally committed athletes, but then not having any training programmes for them but instead relying on them to continue with training at their own initiative. Coaches know that most athletes train much harder when the conditions are right, including the influence of peers, namely other committed athletes. Building team spirit, in other words mutual influence to foster achievement, is vital to sporting success. Likewise, to foster honesty, it makes sense to build team spirit of a different sort — mutual commitment to honesty.

The analogy to athletics brings up the role of competition, noted by Niels as a factor in promoting dishonesty. In sports, the ideal of clean and honest competition is often undermined by the desire to win. Seeking to win is a key driver behind the use of drugs in sport, which insiders say is far more common than revealed by the occasional positive drug test.[23] Athletes use various psychological techniques, such as verbal insults, to disturb the concentration of opponents. There are plenty of honest athletes, but incentives to cheat are considerable,

especially at advanced levels where the stakes are higher. Building team spirit involves fostering a cooperative, supportive atmosphere among athletes, typically those on a team whose opponents are another team.

In academic competitions, in contrast, students seldom operate in teams — they are individuals seeking grades and degrees. There are few cross-institution competitive events, for example Harvard scholarly teams competing against those at Yale. This means building team spirit for honesty is that much harder.

Niels refers to a book by Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition.*[24] This is now a classic. Kohn surveys the evidence in psychology and other fields concerning competition and makes the startling claim that there is hardly any evidence that competition works better than cooperation. This is startling because western societies are built on competition, especially in education and the economy. Students compete for grades and degrees; workers compete for jobs and promotions. Competition is widely seen as a good thing, bringing out excellence. Kohn says this approach isn't supported by any decent evidence.

Educators commonly seek to encourage a love of learning in students. It is well known that intrinsic motivation — wanting to learn — is far more effective than extrinsic motivation, namely inducements. A student might be encouraged to study by an upcoming exam, but after the exam pay no attention to the material and so quickly forget nearly everything learned. Teachers know that if a topic in the syllabus is not assessed, very few students will bother with it. Assessment — exams, essays, reports, presentations — is what channels student effort. Can

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23 See, for example, Rick McGuire, "Athletes at risk," in Ray Tricker and David L. Cook, eds., *Athletes at Risk: Drugs and Sport* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1990), 1–14, at 12.

24 Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

assessment be used to foster intrinsic motivation? The answer has to be something like "only with great difficulty."

Few students would attend a university if there were no degrees. Degrees are the key incentive, providing a credential that helps to obtain jobs and status. If the only benefit from attending university was learning, then only those genuinely interested in learning would show up, and that would be just a small fraction of present enrolments.

So here's the problem: most students attend university to obtain credentials.[25] Learning is secondary. Very few students approach a test with the thought of maximising their understanding. Instead, they want to maximise their score on the test, even if this means reduced understanding. Cramming — studying at the last moment — is widespread, even though it is well known that retention is far less than with steady study over a longer period. Few students keep studying after classes and exams are over, though ongoing engagement with ideas and skills is the basis for improvement and eventually for expert performance. Is it any wonder that some students cheat?

Honour codes, along with other mechanisms to promote student honesty, are thus in conflict with damaging influences built into higher education, especially the quest for degrees and competition with other students. Many teachers valiantly try to push against these influences, for example by encouraging student collaboration in learning and fostering deep learning though personal engagement with material. These efforts are valuable but often overwhelmed by the influence of degrees and competition. Honour codes can still make a difference, but considerable effort may be required to achieve the benefits.

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25 For the wider context, see Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

Individual honesty

The evidence suggests that whether an individual student cheats depends greatly on the context, especially on what others are doing. Therefore, to promote honesty, the goal is to promote a culture of honesty or, if you like, of honour. Nevertheless, it is worth asking, what can an individual do? Suppose you are immersed in a culture of cheating. Does that mean you have to join in?

Tactics for promoting individual honesty are exactly the same as for groups — they just rely more on the individual. First is awareness: you need to find out what honesty means. If everyone you know is doing something — offering a payment, sharing answers, whatever — is it really okay? Sometimes you can consult a specialist, or apply general principles, or look to other organisations or societies for models.

If nearly every parent helps their child by doing some of their homework, is this cheating? You might reason that it's unfair to children whose parents are unable or unwilling to give comparable assistance. In thinking this way, you've used another method of promoting honesty: thinking of ways to understand it. You think clearly and logically about what people are doing and then figure out how to proceed.

Being personally honest involves valuing honesty and fairness. That seems obvious enough, but in many cases people think it's okay to obtain special advantages for themselves or those close to them. If some parents are able to afford special tutoring for their children, is this cheating? Perhaps not in the technical sense, but it certainly can give an advantage not available to everyone.

To promote your own personal honesty, it's worth bringing authorities to your support. If you're religious, you might rely on injunctions such as "You shall not steal," and apply this broadly

to any form of cheating. Or you might find writers who provide the same guidance from a secular standpoint.

Finally, and most importantly, is practising being honest. This helps to develop the skills to resist temptations and to behave with dignity. This can be difficult and sometimes, in a culture of corruption, leads to reprisals. How to survive in such situations is another story and may involve more than simply remaining honest yourself: the next step is to intervene against dishonesty, sometimes a perilous enterprise.

Conclusion

An honour code is one way to promote honesty among students. The basic idea is to create widespread commitment to honesty. In an atmosphere in which cheating is abhorrent, fewer students will try to cheat and others will be willing to report violations.

For an honour code to work, students need to know it exists. This is obvious enough: the point is that regular reminders will help keep the code salient. Students need to believe in the code. Again, this is obvious, but there are always some cynics. Students need to understand how the code operates and why it works. This helps them explain it to others and inoculates them against counter-arguments. The code will have greater credibility when authoritative figures support it. This includes leaders of the institution, teachers and, most importantly, other students, given that peer influence is incredibly strong. Finally, students need to practise the code. The more they follow it in everyday encounters, the more it will become a habit, built into their behaviour.

One of the crucial parts of an honour code is that students help to run it, for example participating in the tribunal to judge violations of the code. This gives the code greater credibility and also gives students a sense of participation and ownership.

An honour code is an example of a contextual or system-based approach to honesty. Rather than trying to select individuals who are honest, the approach assumes students are strongly influenced by their environment, in particular how other students are behaving. An honour code usually works best when it is long established and where most students live on campus and know each other well, maximising mutual influence.

If an honour code were the primary influence on students, cheating wouldn't be a problem. The trouble is that there are other influences, especially competition between students for grades, the general quest for degrees, and the attractions of other activities such as socialising. (Study? How much easier and nicer it is to purchase a written-to-order essay on the web and go to a party!) One solution to the challenge is to promote cooperation as an alternative to competition. This is possible within classrooms to some extent, but in the education system as a whole, grades and degrees are crucial. It doesn't matter whether you know far more than a Yale graduate because, without a high school diploma, your prospects are not nearly as good. As long as credentials are more important than actual learning, and credentials are keys to careers, cheating will be a problem.

This examination of honour codes reveals several things. Taken as a good thing in itself, an honour code can be promoted by awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action, the same methods used to promote other good things. Honour codes are just one way to promote student honesty, but they must confront a deeper problem, namely the primacy of credentials. Promoting an honour code promotes honesty within an education system, but the system has structural shortcomings, notably credentialism. This is a reminder that when promoting good things, it is worth looking at the wider picture and examining alternative ways to achieve fundamental goals.