

# SOME GOOD NEWS *About* ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

BY DONALD MCCABE AND GARY PAVELA



T

he press frequently reports instances of academic dishonesty in our schools and colleges. The news is usually alarming—like the cover proclamation on the November 22, 1999, issue of *U.S. News & World Report* that “a new epidemic of fraud is sweeping through our schools.” Both of us have contributed to such stories, and we certainly don’t dispute them.


But what’s missing, in our view, is an appropriate emphasis on some surprisingly good news hidden behind such headlines: effective strategies are being increasingly implemented to reduce high rates of cheating, even at large universities. Those strategies—emphasizing student leadership and intensive programming about the importance of academic integrity—suggest that faculty and administrators can influence student behavior and enhance the ethical development of students.

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## TRADITIONAL VERSUS MODIFIED HONOR CODES

**S**trong traditional academic honor codes typically include provisions such as unproctored exams, a written pledge that students are asked to sign attesting to the integrity of their work, and a strong (often exclusive) student role in the judicial system that addresses allegations of academic dishonesty. Some traditional codes also include non-toleration provisions that encourage or require students to report any cheating they see among other students. Modified honor codes typically include a strong role for students in the judicial process but generally do not mandate unproctored exams or the use of a pledge, although these can often be used at an instructor's option in selected courses. 

### THE HONOR CODE TRADITION

We've shown on other occasions that schools with traditional academic honor codes have lower rates of academic dishonesty than schools without such codes. In 1996, Donald McCabe and Linda Trevino talked about this issue in a *Change* article, "What We Know About Cheating in College: Longitudinal Trends and Recent Developments" (see *Resources*). They concluded that "the climate or culture of academic integrity found on a campus may be the most important determinant of the level of student cheating on that campus." The article suggested that traditional academic honor codes are one effective way to achieve a positive and supportive campus culture regarding academic integrity. Their work, as well as that of Bill Bowers in the 1960s, provides important empirical support for the effectiveness of such codes.

For example, in a 1995 study of more than 4,000 students on 31 campuses, McCabe and Trevino reported that 54 percent of the students on honor-code campuses admitted to one or more incidents of serious cheating compared to 71 percent on campuses with no code. The influence of codes was even more evident in the number of students who admitted to repeated instances of serious cheating on tests/exams; while 7 percent of the students at honor-code schools admitted to such cheating, more than twice that number (17 percent) did so at schools without an honor code. 

### MODIFIED HONOR CODES


With a few notable exceptions, such as the University of Virginia, traditional academic honor codes are typically found at private schools with small to moderate enrollments. Conventional wisdom suggests it is more difficult to develop and nurture a strong sense of campus community at large universities—an important foundation upon which an honor code tradition can be built.

In their *Change* article, however, McCabe and Trevino suggested that the modified honor code approach then being implemented at the University of Maryland at College Park might be a viable alternative for schools that feel a traditional academic honor code would not work on their campus. While the Maryland code lacks such traditional elements as unproctored exams and a non-toleration clause, it mandates a major student role in the judicial system. Perhaps more importantly, it encourages significant student involvement in promoting academic integrity through such strategies as working with faculty to reduce student cheating, serving on judicial panels,

## THE CENTER FOR ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

**T**he Center for Academic Integrity is a consortium of 200 schools joined together in a common effort to help member institutions develop more effective academic integrity programs. The center's activities include:

- An annual conference that provides a forum for schools to showcase successful approaches to enhancing academic integrity;
- Encouraging and supporting research on academic integrity and student cheating;
- Developing "fundamental principles" that define the level of integrity that should be expected of all students in their academic work; and
- Providing guidance to faculty members on strategies to encourage student integrity in their courses.

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and making presentations to their peers about the importance of integrity.

Interest in such approaches has grown significantly in the last five to 10 years, and elements of a modified code approach have been introduced on a number of campuses, including Kansas State University, the University of Tennessee, and the University of Georgia. Also, the University of Minnesota faculty senate recently endorsed a modified code in response to concerns raised by incidents of cheating involving the school's men's basketball team.

### DO MODIFIED CODES WORK?

While we strongly support this movement, until now, much of the data about the success of modified codes has been almost completely anecdotal. That changed this past fall, however, when three large state universities with modified honor codes—Kansas State University, the University of California-Davis, and the University of Maryland at College Park—participated in a survey of academic integrity involving over 2,100 students on 21 campuses. This project, conducted under the auspices of the Center for Academic Integrity and funded by the John Templeton Foundation, included a cross-section of schools—one community college, seven state universities, and 13 private institutions. In addition to the modified codes at Kansas State, UC-Davis, and Maryland, there were nine private institutions with academic honor codes (eight were traditional codes). The remaining nine schools did not employ any form of honor code.

The major finding of this new research was empirical confirmation of a relationship between modified honor codes and lower levels of student cheating, even on large campuses where student cheating is generally higher. While the survey showed cheating on the three large campuses with modified codes was more prevalent than on the smaller traditional-honor-code campuses (as prior research would predict), it was significantly less pronounced than the level found on campus-

es with no honor code. This result can be seen in the following survey data, which show the number of students who admitted to one or more instances of serious cheating.

A similar pattern was observed in the number of students who admit to more than three incidents of serious test cheating—students who may be labeled “repetitive” test cheaters. At private schools with an honor code, 6 percent of respondents admitted to repetitive cheating, versus the 17 percent at campuses with no code. Once again, students at the large public universities with modified codes reported an intermediate level of cheating—10 percent in this case.

Of course, we should not lose sight of the fact that the majority of students, even at schools with honor codes, admit they have cheated in college. Perhaps equally disturbing is the ease with which many students are able to justify or rationalize cheating. In particular, they often find a convenient way to place the blame on others—citing other students who cheat, faculty who do a poor job in the classroom, institutional indifference to cheating, and a society that supplies few positive role models when it comes to personal integrity.

Although their systems are far from perfect, honor-code schools differ from their peer institutions in that they actively communicate to students the importance of academic integrity as a core institutional value and the major role students must play in achieving this institutional goal. But it’s important that institutional efforts to address cheating be aimed at the entire campus community, not just students. In the ideal case, all students, faculty, and administrators should feel some responsibility for academic integrity, since it lies at the very core of the academic enterprise.

As suggested earlier, however, many people have been concerned about the ability of large campuses to communicate this message effectively to all members of the campus community. While these new survey data provide empirical support for the effectiveness of modified honor codes, the fact remains that implementing an effective modified code at a large public university—with its many part-time and commuter students—is a difficult challenge. Many students at these institutions can easily remain anonymous, dissociating themselves from other students and resulting peer pressures to adopt the community’s standards.

### DEVELOPING A MODIFIED HONOR CODE

Perhaps the most important element of a modified honor code is significant student involvement in designing and enforcing campuswide academic integrity policies, and in educating other students about the importance of academic integrity. Such an approach not only communicates to students that the institution is committed to academic integrity, it also encourages students to take responsibility for their own behavior.

Some institutions use honor pledges as part of a modified

code—usually in conjunction with related programming in orientation and “first-year” classes—but they are not essential. Penalties tend to be comparatively strict (often including some kind of temporary transcript notation), but have an educational rather than punitive emphasis. Students are assumed to be capable of ethical development, and are engaged in substantive discussions about the importance of trust and honesty in academic life, and in the careers they plan to pursue. Most professors at modified-honor-code schools proctor examinations, and students are encouraged to challenge—but generally are not required to report—offenders.

A sense of how modified honor code systems work (and the educational emphasis associated with them) can be found in the February 15, 2000, *Los Angeles Times* story about the University of California-Davis (“Focus on Ethics Can Curb Cheating, Colleges Find”):



*The major finding of this new research was empirical confirmation of a relationship between modified honor codes and lower levels of student cheating, even on large campuses where student cheating is generally higher.*

Under UC-Davis' modified honor code, the student-run Campus Judicial Board decides the fate of students in the thorniest cheating cases. The board members—and often the students who come before them—also become campus cheerleaders for academic honesty. "The university takes pride in catching people early on and turning them around," said John McCann, an engineering student. "I know because I was one of those cases." McCann was caught two years ago lifting another student's homework . . . "I knew I made a mistake and I admitted it," he said . . . "I had to take my punches." McCann, now a graduate student and teaching assistant, has found himself turning in undergraduates for copying each other's homework. "In my classes," McCann said, "I make an announcement: 'You do not cheat....'"

## HOW A MODIFIED CODE CAN BE IMPLEMENTED

The beauty of modified honor codes is that they can be implemented at a broad range of colleges and universities. The following suggestions are designed to help those contemplating such an effort.

- **Ask students to explain the nature and extent of campus cheating.** A simple starting point is to listen to students. Create an informal "Academic Integrity Advisory Council" consisting of a diverse group of student leaders. Ask the students to discuss the nature and extent of academic dishonesty on campus. They'll probably be candid, as long as they're not asked to name offenders. Be prepared to hear bad news. Invite key faculty members to participate, and solicit their advice.

- **Give interested students and faculty members a voice in setting campus policy.** Key student leaders and faculty members who are troubled by widespread academic dishonesty will want to take action. The administration and campus governing bodies may then be encouraged to give the Academic Integrity Advisory Council—expanded to include faculty representatives—the authority to review current policies and devise new ones. The experiences of other schools should be studied and considered. A guiding document might be the "Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity" developed by the Center for Academic Integrity ([academicintegrity.org](http://academicintegrity.org)).

- **Allow students to play a major role in the resolution of contested cases.** There are many components of effective academic integrity systems (for more information, see the articles by McCabe and Pavela, listed in the *Resources* box on page 37), including clear, consistent definitions of academic dishonesty. An especially important feature of honor codes, however, is the delegation of significant authority to students to resolve contested cases. A grant of such authority produces better decision-making, since students have practical insights into campus life that administrators and faculty members often lack. Student participation also promotes

higher standards, since students tend to be strict with their peers, especially when they encounter deception or evasion. Properly trained students who help resolve cases see the personal issues involved—including a full range of emotions—from multiple perspectives. Students feel a heightened sense of responsibility for the process, and are better able to explain it to other students in ways likely to have the greatest educational impact.

Faculty members can also make important contributions on hearing panels (preferably composed mostly of students), especially at schools that do not have a tradition or history of all-student panels. Faculty members' experience and accumulated wisdom help them ask more probing questions, and they can also be less inhibited than students about raising and exploring broader ethical issues and engaging in ethical dialogue. Faculty participation can also be valuable because faculty panel members educate their colleagues about the academic integrity process—including the valuable contributions of students—and can sometimes allay grievances associated with perceived "unfavorable" outcomes.

- **Enforce significant sanctions keyed to an academic integrity seminar.** Students involved in managing academic integrity systems understand that a simple grade penalty for academic dishonesty may not be a sufficient deterrent, especially to individuals already doing poorly in a course. A better approach may be the "XF" grade penalty on their transcript—such as that used by the University of Maryland and elsewhere—to note "Failure Due to Academic Dishonesty." A transcript notation is a serious sanction. Done in accordance with fair and established procedures, the notation adheres to due process and other constitutional protections.

However, it is also a good idea to create a process that allows the "XF" notation to be removed for a first offense if an accused student completes an academic integrity seminar. Such a seminar can help students examine the personal and social impact of academic dishonesty, and can become a focal point for academic integrity programming. (An academic integrity seminar syllabus used at the University of Maryland can be found at [umd.edu/ethics](http://umd.edu/ethics) under "integrity seminar.")

- **Help student leaders educate their peers.** One of the most important tasks of a student Academic Integrity Advisory Council or honor council is communication with new students before and after they arrive on campus. Students about to come to college are intensely interested in the peer culture they will encounter. A personal letter from a student leader affirming the importance of academic integrity could have lasting impact. Many forms of reiteration should occur thereafter: in orientation, classroom presentations, and course syllabi. Academic integrity policies can also be a bridge to ethical development programming, especially in upper-level courses focusing on professional ethics.

## ASSESSING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY ON YOUR CAMPUS

In the 1999-2000 academic year, 12 schools from around the country tested a set of materials designed by the Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) to help colleges and universities assess their academic integrity policies and programs and the general state of academic integrity on their campuses. This work was supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

These assessment guides included surveys for students, faculty, and administrators; background materials on the topic of assessment; a variety of readings on academic integrity; and a comprehensive set of questions to help each school assess its academic integrity policies, disciplinary procedures, sanctions, educational programs, ethics curricula, and internal research or evaluation initiatives.

These pilot schools found the project extremely useful and recommended that the assessment materials be revised and made available to a national audience. CAI has accepted this challenge, and a revised Academic Integrity Assessment and Action Guide will be available in the spring of 2001. Information about the assessment guide (including ordering information) will be posted on the CAI Web site when it becomes available at [academicintegrity.org](http://academicintegrity.org). Alternatively, you may send e-mail to [integrity@duke.edu](mailto:integrity@duke.edu) for further information.

- **Develop fair, prompt, and efficient due process procedures.** Due process requires fundamental fairness, not procedural complexity. Faculty participation will be encouraged if individual faculty members are allowed some discretion in resolving less serious first offenses after meeting with the accused student. Proposed sanctions might be reviewed or decided by a hearing panel with majority student participation. Gary Pavela sets forth a detailed proposal along these lines in a model code of academic integrity published in the summer 1997 *Journal of College and University Law*, titled "Applying the Power of Association on Campus: A Model Code of Academic Integrity." (See *Resources*.)

- **Give student leaders support and guidance.** While all-student honor committees have been successful at many schools, some have become a magnet for litigation. Unchecked autonomy given to the student judicial committee can lead to long delays, convoluted procedures, confused opinions, or inconsistent results. Whether or not the judicial committee consists entirely of students, affirming and protecting academic integrity remain a shared community responsibility, not a burden to be borne by students alone. Students involved in the judicial system should receive appropriate guidance and support (but not interference) from the faculty and campus leadership. As noted earlier, faculty participation on judicial panels makes particularly good sense on a campus implementing any kind of honor system for the first time.

- **Keep faculty members and senior administrators informed.** Faculty members and key administrators tend to form distorted impressions of campus academic integrity systems, usually based on single incidents told by dissatisfied participants. Both need regular information with hard data (such as a yearly summary report) about the overall effectiveness of

## RESOURCES

### RESEARCH

Significant research has been conducted on the issue of academic integrity among college students over the last decade, building on the seminal work of Bill Bowers. Those interested in this research might wish to consult the following.

- Bowers, W.J. *Student Dishonesty and Its Control in College*, New York: Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, 1964.
- McCabe, D.L., and L.K. Trevino. "What We Know About Cheating in College: Longitudinal Trends and Recent Developments," *Change*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1996, pp. 28-33.
- McCabe, D.L., L.K. Trevino, and K.D. Butterfield. "Academic Integrity in Honor Code and Non-Honor Code Environments: A Qualitative Investigation," *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 70, No. 2, 1999, pp. 211-234.
- Pavela, Gary. "Applying the Power of Association on Campus: A Model Code of Academic Integrity," *Journal of College and University Law*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1997, pp. 97-118.
- Pavela, G.R., and D.L. McCabe. "The Surprising Return of Honor Codes," *Planning for Higher Education*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1993, pp. 27-32.

### HONOR CODES

A number of schools maintain full descriptions of their honor codes on their Web sites. Interested readers may wish to consult one of the following:

- University of California-Davis at [sja.ucdavis.edu/SJA/ACOC.html](http://sja.ucdavis.edu/SJA/ACOC.html)
- University of Maryland at College Park at [umd.edu/jpo](http://umd.edu/jpo) under the heading "office branches"
- University of Virginia at [student.virginia.edu/~honor](http://student.virginia.edu/~honor)

### SEMINAR INFORMATION

Information about the academic integrity seminar used at the University of Maryland at College Park may be found at [umd.edu/ethics/](http://umd.edu/ethics/) under the heading "integrity seminar."

academic integrity policies, especially the likely educational impact of a modified honor code. Generally, a positive response will be engendered if deficiencies (including any pattern of delays in case resolution) are reported honestly and help is sought.

- **Encourage presidential leadership.** What presidents choose to emphasize becomes a campuswide focus, often carried over into classrooms and institutional publications. One of the best ways for student leaders to interest a president in academic integrity policies is to meet and discuss them with the president. This potential role for a student Academic Integrity Advisory Council or honor committee is as important as educating other students or the faculty.

- **Evaluate and benchmark.** Modified honor codes require significant investments in student energy, faculty time, and administrative resources. They may fail if participants don't see

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tangible results, influenced by good ideas and practices developed elsewhere. Careful evaluation and benchmarking are essential components of modern management and are especially important when new ideas are tested in the cautious, contentious environment of American higher education. To assist schools interested in assessing the state of academic integrity on their campuses, the Center for Academic Integrity has been engaged in a multi-year project to develop meaningful academic integrity assessment materials. The current status of this project is described in "Assessing Academic Integrity on Your Campus," on pp. 37.

## CONCLUSION

Academic integrity at our schools and colleges is a matter of intense public concern. The current generation of students faces the danger of being portrayed as moral slackers, habituated to cheating. However, our research and experience tell a different story. A substantial majority of students will support stricter penalties for academic dishonesty. What students need is creative and courageous leadership, grounded in the belief that students—with proper guidance—should play a vital role

in designing and enforcing standards of academic integrity.

The research data discussed above; the experience of the University of California-Davis and the University of Maryland at College Park, among others; the recent adoption of modified honor codes by the Universities of Tennessee and Georgia; the adoption of more traditional honor systems by Georgetown University, George Washington University, and others within the last decade—all suggest students are ready for such change. We encourage faculty and campus leaders to seize this opportunity to join with their student leadership in reevaluating and revitalizing existing campus policies on academic integrity. □

**Author's Note:** For campuses wishing to learn more about implementing an academic honor code, *The National Conference on Ethics in America* held annually at West Point, the annual conference of the Center for Academic Integrity, and the experience of other campuses (including those whose Web sites are highlighted in the Resources box) can all serve as an important first step.

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