

Undergraduate Ethics at Homewood

A Report by the

Ethics Policy Committee

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to the Joint Curriculum Committee

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FINAL VERSION 3/3/03

Responsibilities and Structure

In the spring of 2002, the Joint Curriculum Committee charged Deans Weiss and Bader to form and chair a committee to examine undergraduate ethics on the Homewood Campus. Growing concerns about the scope and seriousness of academic violations prompted this request. The Curriculum Committee asked for an assessment of the problem and for recommendations, with special attention to the creation of an “honor code” for the Homewood campus.

The “Honor Code Committee” began meetings in the spring of 2002 with an open membership consisting of administrators, faculty, staff, graduate students and undergraduates. The committee changed its working name to the Ethics Policy Committee as it became clear that discussions needed to be broader than a focus on an honor code, and with the growing consensus that an honor code was not an appropriate solution. The Committee met regularly in spring 2002 and throughout the current academic year, each time with strong attendance from the entire community. The Committee hosted a Town Meeting on April 17, 2002, which allowed for further input. This report reflects the input of all those participating. In addition, the Committee conducted a survey of peer institutions, searching for new models and attempting to evaluate the wisdom of adopting a more formal honor code.

Findings from Homewood

The Ethics Policy Committee finds deep dissatisfaction with the state of ethics on the Homewood Campus. Every sector of the community believes that cheating is a serious problem. It is difficult to gather reliable data to support this belief, as surveys rarely capture violations and rumors create their own reality. Nevertheless, the Committee agreed that suspicion of cheating alone was sufficient to undermine our community. It creates distrust and calls into question the integrity of learning and achievement. Even if cheating is only a rumor shared by many, it destroys our very mission. We did not need empirical verification to draw this conclusion.

The perception of unethical behavior is tied closely with a larger concern about the health of our community. Here, the findings of the Committee parallel those of the President’s Commission on Undergraduate Education (CUE), which identifies a lack of community as a critical failing of the Hopkins experience. When students and faculty do not care what effect their behavior has on others, they lose an important incentive to act ethically. When students feel that a professor does not care about teaching, students lose respect for

the mission of learning with integrity. When a professor believes a student wants only a good grade at any cost, he or she will treat the student with suspicion. Cheating and the perception of cheating find fertile soil in a community already rife with mistrust and disinterest.

The Committee finds that several academic policies and practices inadvertently contribute to ethical problems. Grading policies that put a quota or limit on the number of A's make success a zero sum game. This encourages students to undermine each other's success and to cheat to "get ahead." Students often complain that they do not know how instructors define "cheating," especially regarding collaboration on assignments. When does helping a friend learn become cheating? The Committee also finds that repeated use of exams or exam questions creates ethical problems for students. Students have unequal access to "old exams," collected by friends, alumni, fraternities and other clubs and groups. This creates deep resentment by those who did not have this resource, and it undermines respect for faculty.

Finally, the Committee finds that the system of enforcement is weak and inconsistent. Many faculty have expressed a lack of faith in the Ethics Board, which investigates and prosecutes academic violations. They find the Board to be inappropriately forgiving to violators or indecisive. Punishments are weak, sending a signal to the community that cheating is not a serious matter. Such perceptions, however accurate, may contribute to an equally serious problem: weak detection and inconsistent reporting. Instructors vary in their vigilance, partly because they have other concerns and partly because detection can be very difficult. When cheating has been detected, instructors often fail to report this to the Associate Dean of Student Affairs, who is responsible for ethics enforcement. Failure to report violations and/or agreed punishments creates inequities and makes prosecution of repeat offenders difficult.

Findings from Peer Institutions

In January and February 2003, the Committee surveyed the effectiveness and satisfaction with honor policies at peer institutions. We sent surveys to two people at each of 23 schools—one administrator and one student- group representative—and we have received 18 completed surveys from 14 schools.* Of these, two surveys have been disqualified. Despite the limitations of our data, we have noticed some important trends.

Schools with formal honor codes find these codes to be integral to the academic life and community of the institution, significantly more integral than do schools with other kinds of honor policies. Of the four schools with honor codes that responded, the average rating of the importance that the honor code meant to academic life fell between "Very Important" and "Somewhat Important." Of the schools without formal honor codes, the average importance fell between "Somewhat Important" and "Neutral." It appears that universities with formal honor codes view them as essential to their mission and uppermost in the minds of their students and staff.

* Brown, Caltech, Chicago, Columbia, Dartmouth, Emory, MIT, Michigan, Notre Dame, Princeton, Rice, Stanford, Virginia, and William and Mary.

These schools claim to have strong communities and take pride in their honor codes. While Johns Hopkins is looking to build a stronger community, an honor code may not be the best solution at this time, for two reasons. First, it is unclear whether the relationship between such codes and strong community is one of cause and effect. Second, some of the schools with formal honor codes find that these codes are ineffective at preventing or lessening academic misconduct. These issues and concerns suggest that a formal honor code may not serve as an adequate solution to the ethical problems we see so prevalently at Hopkins. Instituting an honor code is a lengthy process requiring significant effort and changing of attitudes over time, not something that can happen overnight. While an established and well-enforced ethics policy seems to be appropriate for Hopkins right now, a formal honor code does not.

Recommendations

We are pleased to offer a set of recommendations more appropriate to our history, culture and administrative structure than a formal honor code. These recommendations, some already in place, call upon many members of the community to be more committed to the creation of and enforcement of an ethical community.

- **Strengthen Administrative Support**
 - *Expand the Role of the Associate Dean of Student Affairs.* Most of the following recommendations will require leadership and administrative support to be successful. The most logical person to provide this is the associate dean of Student Affairs (the ADSA). The associate dean now supervises the Ethics Board and is the primary contact for faculty. We recommend that the ADSA's role grow to include faculty and student education, program development, and support for detection. This will require additional administrative resources and staffing. If ethics is to remain a policy priority, we must invest the resources needed.
 - *Broaden the Mandate of the Ethics Board.* The Board now serves as an investigative and prosecutorial body. We recommend that this role grow in parallel to the ADSA's role, supporting the dean's efforts to educate faculty and students, and to develop appropriate outreach programming. We suggest that the Board focus its programmatic attention on education, as students may be more inclined to listen to their peers. Dedicating an education officer would be an appropriate first step.

- **Improve Institutional Outreach**
 - *Engage other JHU Divisions.* Following the format of the CUE, the Committee recognizes that Homewood's challenge to be more ethical is shared by other divisions, notably Peabody. We recommend that the ADSA and the Board communicate with administrators and faculty in other divisions to discuss best practices and ways to share resources.
 - *Join the Center for Academic Integrity.* Likewise, the Committee acknowledges that other universities face the same challenge. This motivated us to consult with other universities in our survey. We recommend that Hopkins join the Center for Academic Integrity,

associated with the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. The Center has become a clearinghouse for best practices and an important forum for discussion. Fees are nominal, and membership offers an introduction to equally concerned institutions and their respective ethics officials.

- **Improve Ethics Education**

- *Make Ethics Central to Orientation.* Orientation is an obvious opportunity to educate incoming students on the importance of ethical behavior. Orientation sessions should advance this mission aggressively. We have begun this work by making a session on ethics the only mandatory meeting for all freshmen. Over 90 percent of the incoming class attended, and the response was very positive. But more programming should be developed. This effort is simplified by the current administrative structure, where Orientation and the Ethics Board both report to the Associate Dean of Student Affairs.
- *Stress Ethics in Recruitment and Admissions.* No Orientation can change significantly the ethical development of students if they are not ethical before they arrive on campus. The Office of Admissions should make it clear to all potential students that ethics is important to us. The implicit or explicit message should be that we have no interest in inviting unethical people to join our community. Admissions should consider adding to their acceptance forms a statement about the importance of ethics to Hopkins and how admission demands respect for our rules and procedures.
- *Publish and Update a Guidebook on Ethics.* In a collaborative effort between the Office of Academic Advising and a former chair of the Ethics Board, Benjamin Silverman '02, the University has published a guide on Undergraduate Ethics. The guide is designed to explain rules and procedures in a simple, easy-to-read format. It has been very positively received. We recommend continued publication of the Guidebook, updated as needed, and widely distributed annually. The ADSA should supervise this effort.
- *Tie Ethics to Registration.* We recommend that a statement on ethics be included in the Registrar's web system. Students would be required to acknowledge that they had read and understood the Guidebook on ethics before having access to online registration.
- *Explore Other Educational Programs.* The ADSA, in collaboration with the Ethics Board, should explore other ways to educate students and faculty about ethics. Aside from maintaining a web site that needs updating, the associate dean and the Board have not made education a priority, focusing their attention on investigation and prosecution. We recommend greater attention to educational programming. Such programming might include building a stronger ethics component to any "University 101"-type coursework for freshmen, and a speaker series featuring important ethicists and scholars.

- **Lessen Opportunities for Cheating**
 - Promote a Syllabus Insert to Faculty. Students complain that they do not always understand the expectations or rules of an instructor regarding ethics. We recommend that faculty make ethics education a priority, providing guidelines at the beginning of the term. As part of the effort to publish a guidebook, the Office of Academic Advising has circulated a syllabus insert that faculty can tailor to their specific needs. The Committee believes this is a promising practice but is concerned that few faculty have used the insert. We recommend that appropriate administrators and department chairs support use of the insert.
 - Create an Insert for Exams. The Committee supports repeated efforts to educate students about the importance of ethics. Another such opportunity is during exams. Such a statement, to be finalized by the ADSA, would be signed at the time of the exam and might read: *I have read and understood the guidebook, "Academic Ethics for Undergraduates." I agree to complete this exam without unauthorized assistance from any person, materials, or device. [When appropriate:] I agree to abide by the rules specific to this exam: [to be completed by the instructor]. [Signed and dated.]*
 - Put all Exams on Reserve. To lessen inequities caused by inconsistent access to "old exams," the Committee recommends that all exams be placed on electronic reserve at the MSE Library. Many departments have discussed and adopted this recommendation, though some have not voiced an opinion on the matter. The Committee further recommends that the ADSA provide whatever support departments need to regularly and comprehensively submit exams.
 - Encourage Faculty to Discuss Ethics. The Committee recommends that the ADSA and the Ethics Board explore programs for faculty to discuss ethics with each other and with students. This will have an added advantage of increasing confidence in the system and its support institutions.

- **Assist Instructors in Detection**
 - Provide Detection Software as Needed. Faculty should have access to software that can detect patterns of plagiarism. One such software is available through *turnitin.com*. This software takes an electronic version of a student's paper and scans the Internet for text that matches the paper. Such software can be expensive and difficult to use, but it should be available to faculty who suspect plagiarism.
 - Offer Workshops to Faculty and TAs. Detecting plagiarism and other forms of cheating is not simple. Most violations are not detected at all. We recommend that the ADSA and the Ethics Board offer regular workshops to instructors, showing them common ethical violations and how to spot them.
 - Make Ethics Central to TA Orientation. Ethics receives passing attention in TA orientations, but it is an issue that deeply troubles many TAs. The

Committee recommends new and expanded training in detection and briefings on how to handle the process after detection has been made.

- **Improve Reporting and Faculty-Board Relations**
 - *Educate Faculty on Process.* Faculty need to be reassured that the Ethics Board will treat their cases with respect and due diligence. The Board should build greater trust amongst the faculty by educating them more effectively on the process of reporting, investigation and prosecution.
 - *Establish Discussions between Faculty and the Ethics Board.* The Board needs to engage faculty in discussions about ethical problems, to reassure faculty, to learn more effective practices, to find out what faculty need to improve detection and reporting, and to discover other lingering problems.
 - *Facilitate Faculty Reporting.* Faculty often fail to report detected violations for a variety of reasons, all of which should be addressed by the Board and the ADSA: lack of faith in the process, ignorance of procedures, fear that punishments will be too severe or too lax, and/or a belief that the process is too cumbersome and time-consuming. We recommend aggressive outreach to faculty, including individual and department meetings, in addition to other efforts recommended above.

- **Strengthen Ethics Board**
 - *Investigate Changes in Structure.* The Ethics Board, supervised by the ADSA, should examine its own structure for flaws. This internal investigation was beyond the means of the Committee, but we remain concerned that the Board lacks the institutional structure necessary to be decisive.
 - *Provide Any Needed Resources.* If the Board concludes that its organization is sound, it may be in need of additional resources to be more effective. Our recommendations will require additional staff time in Student Affairs, just as expectations for better and more educational materials will require financial resources.

- **Strengthen Penalties**
 - *Strengthen First-time Punishments.* The Committee debated without resolution a proposal to create a more severe minimal punishment. Some members believed that no ethics violation should be consider minor, but others feared that faculty might be hesitant to report offenses if first offenses were met severely. We agree that faculty reporting is critical to the success of an improved ethics system, so we do not recommend a uniform minimal offense. Instead, we urge instructors and the Ethics Boards to balance the need to punish with the mission to educate, counsel, and correct. First punishments should be meaningful and consistent, but appropriate to the severity of the offense. Given the importance of avoiding second offenses, we recommend the Board develop a workshop, mandatory for all first-time offenders, to help students better understand ethics policies. This may be especially important to international students,

whose native ethical code may be different. We also suggest that the faculty and the ADSA urge first-time offenders to seek counseling and academic advising, as their violation may have been prompted by a personal crisis, parental pressure, or poor academic choices.

- **Be Accountable**

The Committee recommends that the Curriculum Committee designate the associate dean of Student Affairs to be responsible for the implementation of these recommendations. We further recommend that the associate dean report to the Curriculum Committee by March 2004 on progress made toward implementation. We expect that report to include feedback from students and faculty about whether programmatic changes have had a positive effect on the ethics of Homewood.

- **Build Community**

This committee was not charged specifically with considering issues of community, but we have found this to be an important factor in ethical behavior. We believe that a more committed effort to ethics will strengthen our mutual relationships and promote greater trust. This mission is at the heart of our recommendations. In addition, we urge administrators, faculty and students to support other and ongoing efforts to strengthen our commitment to each other. The Commission on Undergraduate Education has issued recommendations in this effort, just as it has acknowledged the effect of ethics on the quality of our collective life. We hope these recommendations and others receive serious consideration and support, as appropriate. As these efforts yield positive results, an environment that promotes ethics will grow organically.