GPSF 2011-2012 Honor System Survey Report

Over the past year, the UNC Honor System has come under increased scrutiny and focus from the campus community. Because of their role as both students and instructors, graduate and professional students play a unique role in the program. In November 2011, members of the Graduate and Professional Student Federation (GPSF) called on these students to participate in a survey to gauge attitudes and feelings about the Honor System as well as any specific experiences in dealing with the system. 140 students responded (approximately 1.6% of the graduate and professional student population of UNC) across the College of Arts and Sciences and eight professional schools. This survey and report are designed to represent graduate and professional student opinions on the Honor System.

Survey Information

- 46% of respondents have taught a course at UNC (77% of these students are from the College of Arts and Sciences). 66% of respondents were Ph.D. candidates.
- When asked whether they support the tradition of a student-led Honor System at UNC, an overwhelming majority of students (86%) responded yes.
- In terms of understanding the Honor System, 55% of respondents felt that they did not know enough about the system to be comfortable using it.
- Given the position and responsibilities of being a graduate student at Carolina, 47% of respondents think the Honor System is easy to use, whereas 41% answered ‘Don’t Know’.
- 38 students in the survey said they had experienced academic dishonesty in their teaching experience.
- The students in the survey encountered 90 cases of academic dishonesty. 53 cases were encountered while serving as a TA (23 reported to the Honor System) and 22 cases were encountered while teaching (8 reported to the Honor System).
- 68% of students that had utilized the Honor System were satisfied with the experience.
- A large majority of respondents (87%) would not hesitate to use the Honor Court because of specialized courses or the fear that the general student population might not understand course-specific material.
- 58 students said members of their department encourage use of the Honor System while 70 students said use was discouraged.
**GPSF Action**

*Propose regular training for students in teaching and TA roles at the University.* These trainings should be specific to each department, but should all encompass the importance of the Honor System at Carolina. Additionally, these trainings should not focus on specific violations and their impacts, but how the Honor System and Honor Court can be used to improve the academic climate on campus.

*Encourage faculty to be consistent in their use of the Honor Court.* Graduate instructors are often given contradictory information on whether or not to proceed with cases regarding undergraduate students. These inconsistencies lead to confusion and overall avoidance of the Honor System. Informational sessions could help explain to faculty the role of the System at UNC and how changes are being made to improve its function (by way of the Honor System Task Force and the Committee on Student Conduct). Although it is often difficult to quickly change the academic climate on such an issue, by putting forth these efforts now, gradual progress will be made.

*Support changes to the Honor System that recognize differences between undergraduate and graduate/professional students.* Currently, *The Instrument of Student Governance* sets forth guidelines for sanctions pertaining to Honor System violations. There are major distinctions in the academic responsibilities of undergraduate and graduate students, but the only variance in sanction guidelines pertains to academic retention. By promoting reasonable sanctions that will not tarnish the academic reputation of the University, we feel that more graduate and professional students will be subject to the Honor System guidelines.
Selected Comments from the Survey

In Support of the Honor System

“It seems likely that a student-led honor system would lead the students to both be invested in and buy into the system, so seems like a good plan. The main improvement they could make would be to promulgate information about the system.”

“Really great learning experience for students interested in law & related fields. Enables student point of view judging student misdemeanors.”

“It is VERY EASY to use the system, in fact, all we're allowed to do is report suspected cases.”

“I thought it functioned fine. I will certainly participate in the Honor Court again.”

“I would be willing to participate in the honor court if I was needed.”

“The department strongly recommends the use. Individual faculty vary depending on their personal experience.”

“Our school regularly reminds us that we are under the honor system. In fact we have already been reminded twice this week!”

Criticism of the Honor System

“I support it in theory, but I have not observed that it is effective in practice. I was shocked by the amount of cheating that occurs at UNC. It seemed to me that the Honor System did not influence the students decisions about how to conduct themselves in the classroom. Students who were serious about learning did not cheat. Students who wanted to improve their GPA without increasing their effort did cheat.”

“The system's strengths are keeping the student's honesty and integrity intact. The system, however, is too complicated for a TA or professor to bring violations to the attention on the Honor System, leading them to take matters into their own hands. Furthermore, the non-academic violations (or behavioral violations) often have sanctions which do not apply well to graduate and professional students. For instance, if someone is put on academic probation, often times PhD students are not taking classes anymore, and taking away their ability to publish actually hurts the University more than it does the student, since publishing is the main way to show funding sources where their money is going.”

“The biggest weakness is inconsistency. The honor code is inconsistently applied across courses, disciplines, and instructors, and the sanctions handed down by the court are also often either overly punitive or too weak to be effective.”

“As it is right now, I think the "tradition" is pretty well tainted. The whole system needs complete rethinking/rewriting. The strength, I suppose, is that peers are judging peers. But the weaknesses: students who take responsibility for their mistakes, admit to wrongdoing, etc. are punished more harshly than those who choose to "fight" the charges. Undergrads now know that in an honor court issue, you always deny and place the blame elsewhere (either on the prof., or on the assignment, or on not being taught appropriately at some earlier date)---these students tend to get lighter punishments even as the
offenses are often quite obvious. This doesn't seem right to me; isn't the point to get students to own up to mistakes, to take responsibility for themselves and their education?"

“Students are likely to be biased and favor limited or no punishments for popular students, fraternity brothers/sorority sisters, and athletes.”

“I think that the student-led Honor System is a failure. It places a high burden on faculty for minimal to no results. My personal experiences with the system are disheartening and make me attempt to avoid it at all costs. For example, in a case of clear plagiarism (two students turned in identical papers with each other’s name on it), the honor court did nothing but scold them. The syllabus and all-related classroom material indicated the paper should be independent. The students went unpunished after admitting to and clearly violating the honor code. What is the point of having an honor court if the court protects violators?”

“The extent of the honor system that I'm aware of is that I'm supposed to sign each assignment/exam/etc. to say that I didn't cheat.”

“I really think there should be some sort of dept. liaison to handle cases for grad students; graduate students are in more precarious situations than other types of instructors when it comes to this sort of thing, and since often the charge of plagiarism gets turned back on the graduate student (for failing to write a good assignment, for failing to teach the student not to cheat, etc.) I know many of my colleagues simply won't waste their time and energy on this anymore.”

“As a TA, the times I have brought up honor code violations, the professor has said he/she would handle it, and then-didn't. So I have gone to the trouble of showing that plagiarism happened just to have the professor slap the student on the wrist. When I taught a class, I was advised by senior faculty not to take plagiarism cases to the honor court b/c that system does not work. So far, then, I have not myself gone through the system, but had professors I've worked with choose not to use the system.”

“I chose not to take them to honor court because it's a corrupt system.”

“I think the Honor Court functioned poorly. In each case, cheating and violations were clearly identified with evidence (copied term paper, cheat sheets used during tests). None of the students were sanctioned except for a warning. These experiences have led me to be severely disappointed and disheartened by the honor court system. Plagiarism is an offense that causes TENURED faculty to be fired. Amongst students, it should be an automatic semester suspension.”

“I don't believe I was ever taught how to report things to an Honor System.”