

The Honor Code at the University of Virginia

A Guide for Teaching Assistants

<http://www.virginia.edu/honor/>

What the Honor system is all about: UVa's Honor Code evokes an ideal of student character, conduct, and citizenship, and is an important part of the University's mission and core identity. It emphasizes the importance of honesty, respect, and trust in relating to members of one's community. In practice, as a code of conduct, it says **do not lie, cheat, or steal**. To take any of these actions would be to violate the community of trust among students, faculty, and staff here at the University of Virginia.

How it works: The system is student run, administered by a 27-person Honor Committee to which each school sends representatives – the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences has two representatives. The Honor Committee is intended to promote the system of trust, and deal with violations in these three areas only – at present, anything other than lying, cheating or stealing is a matter for other student bodies such as the University Judiciary Committee, or the University administration.

How TA's are involved: Teaching Assistants are in a unique position in regard to the Honor Code – being bound by it as students, but also having a teaching role in which they may observe violations of that code.

We hope that this is *not* something you will experience as a TA, and thus have provided some suggestions to help minimize this possibility, but also some guidelines for what to do if this does happen in one of your classes.

Making Honor Offenses Less Likely

Syllabus and first section: Many professors include a statement expressing commitment to the Honor Code in their class syllabus – you can do the same on your section syllabus, if you produce one. That way, students do not get an impression that standards can be different between section and lecture. You can also point out the sign in each classroom that states the honor pledge: “*On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment/exam.*”

Exams: Trust lies at the heart of the honor code, allowing for the possibility of take-home exams, among other benefits for students. Most courses still utilize in-class exams, however, and monitoring students during them is normally one of the responsibilities of a TA. Again, being upfront and clear about what you will be looking out for can help. Talking, using notes during a closed-book exam, or copying answers from someone else may be the classic problems, but newer technologies cause headaches too. **Use of cell phones is a prime example.** We're all pretty much attached to them, but cell phones – especially smart phones – are not so smart in the realm of exams. Try to make it clear to students that any use of a phone during an exam could be interpreted negatively, and so they should **turn them off, put them away, and leave them alone** for the duration of the exam. Even if they really are using a phone to tell the time,

or were distracted by a message from a phone set on silent, this is one area where they can easily avoid inviting suspicion.

In addition, many professors ask that students write the honor pledge on their blue book. This might seem like a basic exercise, but it serves as a further reminder to the student of the honor code **to which they subscribed in applying to UVa** (all applicants to the University – grad and undergrad – must check a box agreeing to abide by the Honor Code). Check with your professor if you are unsure about this.

Papers

- **Deadlines:** With numerous deadlines looming, students are under stress and may make poor choices in producing assignments. We've all been there at 4am – panicked and over-caffeinated! No one's judgment is at its best under such circumstances. Try to make students feel that you are accessible if they have problems meeting a deadline – this is a difficult balance to strike in that you don't want to make getting an extension seem like an easy option, but you also don't want students with genuine problems to feel like they have no options. **One way to address these concerns is to have a clear policy about late papers – for every day late you will lose X% of a grade**, for example. Students are often willing to take a penalty when they know upfront what it is, rather than being dishonest in terms of the lateness of a paper or the content of the paper itself.

- **Plagiarism:** Content is the major concern here. Most students have a pretty good sense of what constitutes cheating on a test, for example. But plagiarism seems to be more of a gray area – it is the most common type of violation, particularly with the rise of internet resources. It becomes even easier to drop quotation marks, incorrectly attribute a source, and so on. Emphasizing the need for proper citation as much as you can is important to avoid this - and there are several resources providing further guidance for you as a TA, and for students:
 - o **Council of Writing Program Administrators:** “Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices” – This contains an overview of plagiarism and suggestions for faculty on ways to minimize its occurrence. See <http://wpacouncil.org/node/9>
 - o **Honor Committee Plagiarism Supplement** – This is a five-page overview of what counts as plagiarism and paraphrasing – it is available as a PDF from a link on the front page of the Honor Committee website. See <http://www.virginia.edu/honor/>
 - o See also <http://www.virginia.edu/honor/links.html> for links to an array of citation resources on the web.
 - o ***You could consider including these Honor links on your section syllabus.***

- **Citations and common knowledge:** If you are utilizing readings in class that may be used in papers, make clear how these should be cited (some professors or TA's will accept partial references for readings that have been reviewed in class, and require full citations for outside readings). **Try to be especially clear on what constitutes “common knowledge” for the class** – does this include ideas that were discussed in

class? Does it include a point that you made in a section discussion? It is good to clarify anything along these lines.

- **Group work/collaboration:** Most students will probably form study groups for homework and exams; you should be extremely clear what your expectations are in these instances, and where you will draw the line between acceptable help in studying, and unacceptable collaboration on homework or exam prep. The most common rule is that studying together is acceptable but each student must write down only his own work – but this does not apply to all fields, especially the sciences, where group work is commonly assigned.
- **General:** For an overview of the various actions that would constitute “academic fraud,” see: <http://www.virginia.edu/honor/fraud.html>

What to do if you think an honor offense may have occurred

****For plagiarism cases only**** If you suspect plagiarism from an internet source, *print that source out straight away*. Commonly utilized sites such as Wikipedia, for example, with their user-generated content, can alter substantially in a short period of time.

People you can talk to: As a first step, you would typically want to talk with your professor about the situation and get their feedback.

- There are also a number of Honor Advisors whose role is to provide information and support to individuals with concerns about a possible honor offense. You can talk to them in confidence and get advice on how to proceed. Call the Honor Office at **434 924-7602** to speak to someone, or stop by the **4th Floor of Newcomb Hall** - there are advisors there during business hours.
- Similarly, you can also talk to any Honor Committee member, in confidence – contact information for GSAS reps is below.
- **Talking to these individuals does *not* mean actually reporting a student.**

People you should consider carefully before talking to: Though it might be your first instinct, it may not be a good idea to confront the student immediately and explain your concerns. The reason for this is, at present, the honor code allows for a “**conscientious retraction**” - i.e. a student admits to an offense *before* he or she is aware of any suspicion, and a penalty is worked out between the professor and the Honor committee. If you talk to the student immediately, therefore, you might actually prevent them from taking this step. On the other hand, you may still wish to talk the situation through with the student and try to get a better sense of what happened, and that’s also understandable – either way it’s important to think through the best approach in the particular circumstances facing you and the student.

***** More broadly, it’s important to maintain confidentiality about these situations, only discussing them with those directly involved*****

Reporting a Case: Professors vary in terms of their attitudes toward the Honor Code, and they may or may not want you to take it further. It’s important to know either way that there are many people you can talk to, **and it is up to you whether you report a case or not**. While we feel it is better that honor violations be dealt with through the system set up for this purpose, it

is important to know that **you, as a TA, are not in trouble if you *don't* report.** The resources listed above are available to guide you through the process. If you do decide to proceed, an Honor advisor or Honor Committee member will write down the details about the possible violation. At that point, it becomes an official case.

The Single Sanction: Some TA's express reluctance to report students because of the University's single sanction – whereby a student convicted of an honor offense is permanently excluded from the University. While this is undoubtedly a significant punishment, it has been upheld several times by vote of the student body. It is also important to bear in mind that it is **not applied arbitrarily.** The Honor Committee strives to ensure fairness in all its proceedings – cases are thoroughly investigated, and those lacking in evidence do not proceed to trial. Moreover, substantial efforts are taken to ensure students with psychological problems get support and treatment, and there are specific procedures in place for this.

At the trial stage, a jury of students examines the evidence and decides whether a student is guilty of an honor offense. This decision itself is not a single vote, but involves three criteria – that an **act** violating the honor code occurred, that the student **knew** (or could reasonably be expected to know) that it would constitute an honor offense, and that it is **significant** to the University community in a broader sense. These standards for imposing the single sanction thus seek to reflect its gravity.

The Honor Code is not set in stone: If you have questions or concerns about any aspect of the Honor code, there are a variety of ways to participate and help shape it:

- (i) Come to **Honor Committee meetings** and express your views directly (8pm on Sundays, in the Trial Room, 4th Floor of Newcomb Hall)
- (ii) Attend Honor's **Faculty Advisory Committee** meeting - held the second Thursday of each month, at 4pm, in the Trial Room.
- (iii) Become an Honor **support officer** – students serve as advisors, educators, and counsel in honor cases, and it would be great to see more graduate students in these roles. Recruiting will be held in the spring.
- (iv) **Vote** in student elections – these are held in the spring semester, and can include proposed changes to the Honor Code, in addition to electing representatives to various student bodies.
- (v) Provide **feedback** to your GSAS reps.

The GSAS Representatives to the Honor Committee for 2011-2012 are:

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Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or suggestions – this guide is a work in progress, and we welcome feedback from you all.