Honor Is More about Fairness than Trust

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At Davidson we often tie the concepts of honor and trust so closely together that I fear we miss some important distinctions between the two, and obscure the extent to which our actual practices reflect trust and whether we are according students the right amount of trust.

We faculty at Davidson place a lot of trust in our students to uphold academic integrity, more so than at any other educational institution I know. That’s not only because you have individually pledged to be honest: you genuinely seem to take ownership of the Honor Code as a kind of sacred collective promise, not an alien thing imposed upon you. But as you know, in practice we don’t completely trust you to do the right thing. One way to make that clear is to think what would be entailed if we did grant you unconditional, boundless trust.

Imagine, first, that we had a way to test incoming freshmen on their comprehension of what academic integrity entails, employing myriad examples of what counts as cheating and plagiarism. If some didn’t pass that test initially, we might coach them intensively until they did pass. But let’s say that before classes start, they all pass the test, and solemnly pledge to be scrupulously honest and uphold academic integrity throughout their sojourn at Davidson.

So based on our confidence in your understanding of and commitment to academic integrity (i.e., we’d assume that no one will cheat, because everyone knows what cheating looks like, and everyone’s pledged not to cheat), let’s then imagine that we’ve decided to place complete trust in every student. What would that entail? 1) We could delete from the Honor Code the requirement to report cheating by one’s peers and the penalty for not reporting. 2) We could dissolve the Honor Council, because we would never expect any Honor Code infractions for them to investigate or try. 3) We could make all written tests take-home, and assume that no one will use any unauthorized materials during tests, collaborate with others in prohibited ways, or exceed specified time limits. We could also eliminate the restrictions on backpacks and electronic devices during self-scheduled exams in Chambers. (Why even require such exams to be held only in one building?) And 4) when reading your course papers, we wouldn’t need to check whether you cited sources properly or paraphrased thoroughly, because of course you would always give credit where credit is due.

In fact, if we really trusted you, we wouldn’t need to require you to take any tests or submit any papers or other work products. Instead, at the end of each course, we could ask you to tell us how well you’ve mastered the course material and what grade you deserved. Some students who may not be entirely confident about their mastery of the material or what grade they deserve might then ask us to test their comprehension and skills. But if any students said to us, “I’m confident that I thoroughly mastered the material in this course, and deserve an A,” what reason would we have to doubt them, seeing as they satisfied our “rigorous” assessment of their comprehension of and commitment to integrity as incoming freshmen?

Now, I’m sure you’ll agree that it would be a huge mistake to trust you to that degree. But why? 1) Because we know better than our students what it takes to exhibit mastery and excellence in our fields. That’s partly what it means to have earned a Ph.D., to have proven that mastery to others who previously proven theirs. 2) Because we know that even generally conscientious people don’t always do the right thing. (E.g., our students procrastinate, they panic, they get wasted the night before a test, or they don’t check their uses of sources carefully enough.) So we need to have ways to monitor conduct and performance according to high ethical standards, and punish violations of academic integrity.
Part of our solemn responsibility as faculty is to ensure **fairness**: 1) Fairness of students toward one another, that none takes unfair advantage of an opportunity to cheat. 2) Fairness to other researchers and writers, giving them due credit for their ideas. And 3) fairness to ourselves, in students not deceiving us to believe that they merit grades they haven’t earned.

A **commitment to fairness** is the main point of an honor code, not trust per se. Trust can be the happy **consequence** of a **demonstrated** commitment to honesty and fairness. But trust freely bestowed can also be forfeited. Our obligation to academic integrity justifies our having a degree of **prudent mistrust** of our students.

Given the nature of our honor system at Davidson, we can at least take some comfort in the findings of careful researchers like Dan Ariely (*The [Honest] Truth about Dishonesty*) that people are less likely to cheat: 1) When they’ve made a public commitment to practice ethical conduct (like the pledge-signing ceremony that Dean Shandley instituted years ago). 2) When they’ve also pledged to hold one another accountable for cheating. 3) When their peers openly value honesty. 4) When they regard honesty and fairness as integral to their personal identity. 5) When they’re reminded of their obligations every time they take a test or submit a paper. 6) When their professors guard against cheating and plagiarism, so that honest students don’t feel like dishonest ones are free riders on their ethics.

On that last point, I worry that many of our faculty greatly underestimate the risks of cheating on take-home exams and plagiarism on papers by our students. We don’t actually have a reliable estimate of the percentage of Davidson students who cheat, apparently because we’re afraid to do that research, even though national surveys indicate that over 70% of college students overall admit to cheating, as do about 50% of students at schools with explicit honor codes. I’d wager that our percentage is lower than that, maybe even much lower, but I have no solid evidence to support that belief. No one knows, because we haven’t asked. I think we should be surveying our senior students anonymously, every year.

To be sure, some faculty report even minor errors in citation as full-blown plagiarism, which is unjust to their students. But other faculty don’t place adequate checks on potential test-cheating opportunities, or use the best tools to identify plagiarism. I’m personally conflicted about the requirement that our students report others’ cheating, in other words, that failing to report is as much an Honor Code violation as the cheating itself. On the other hand, that requirement makes me extremely confident that there will be no cheating during an in-class exam after I’ve distributed the test questions and left the room! That’s a welcome change from the in-room proctoring that I felt compelled to do in other college settings.

In any case, I hope that these thoughts will stimulate further reflection and dialogue.