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A Question of Honor

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Cheating on campus undermines the reputation of our universities and the value of their degrees. Now is the time for students themselves to stop it



A meeting of the honor committee at the University of Virginia, which has had a student-run honor system since 1842 (Photo by Will Brumas/The Cavalier Daily)

By William M. Chace

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One of the gloomiest recent reports about the nation's colleges and universities reinforces the suspicion that students are studying less, reading less, and learning less all the time: "American higher education is characterized," sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa said last year, "by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students." Their book, *Academically Adrift*, joins a widening, and often negative, reassessment of what universities contribute to American life. Even President Obama has gotten into the act, turning one problem with higher education into an applause line in his latest State of the Union address. "So let me put colleges and universities on notice," he said: "If you can't stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from

taxpayers will go down. Higher education can't be a luxury—it is an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford.”

Where should we lay the blame for the worsening state of one of the foundations of American civilization, one that has long filled us with justifiable pride? The big public universities are already bogged down by diminishing financial support from the states; private education is imperiled by tuition costs that discourage hundreds of thousands of middle-class and poorer students from applying. Some schools have made heroic attempts to diversify their student bodies, but too little financial aid is available to make access possible for all the applicants with academic promise.

What is happening inside the classroom for those who do get in? Who is teaching the students? Less and less often it is a member of an institution's permanent faculty, and rarer still one of its distinguished professors. More and more of the teaching has been parceled out to part-time instructors who have no hope of landing a full-time position. Because of this, their loyalty to the school that hired them, and to the students they will probably meet in just one course and never again, has diminished.

Amid such melancholy reports from the front, campus amusements that have nothing to do with education—intercollegiate athletics leads the festivities—sop up money, keep coaches in the headlines, and divert public attention from the essential mission of education: to strengthen the minds of young people and to prepare them to cope with the demands of life.

Perhaps that is why, when the public is asked about colleges and universities, the response is increasingly negative with each passing year. According to the Pew Research Center, most American citizens (57 percent) say that higher education “fails to provide good value for the money students and their families spend.” Within the innermost sanctum of the academy the view is almost the same: “About four-in-ten college presidents say the system is headed in the wrong direction,” according to Pew. If university presidents, who by profession and temperament routinely find every glass more than half-full, are so disconsolate, the public can't be expected to be optimistic.

Were this situation to get any worse, it could legitimately be called a crisis. But American colleges and universities are not going under anytime soon. Despite their problems, they employ hundreds of thousands of people, keep towns and even cities financially afloat, and offer cultural resources and, yes, athletic and other entertainments. They adorn the nation with their well-kept campuses. The research done on those campuses makes us safer, improves our health, and inspires our nobler human impulses. Along the way, colleges and universities provide multiyear habitat for millions of postadolescents who, more often than not, are bewilderingly short of ideas about what to do after leaving secondary school. And they continue to offer a haven to those who finish their undergraduate years and do not or cannot enter the present bleak job market. Most of these students are happy to find themselves—for

four, five, or even six years—with other people their age, with whom they can develop social skills while entertaining each other and themselves and exposing their minds to selected academic topics. For all these reasons, the college experience in this country long ago became one of its most acceptable rites of passage. The schools are there because they serve a variety of needs. The challenge is to make them better.

But now they are up against a spectrum of problems whose magnitude they have never faced before. What can they do—amid financial pressures, dwindling public esteem, pre-professional anxieties on the part of their students, and eroded faculty loyalty—to recover the prestige they once enjoyed?

One answer, I believe, rests in what they can do, and must do, about a large and ugly presence on almost every campus: academic dishonesty. Cheating now hurts American higher education; it might well be cheating that can begin to save it.

In college and university classrooms across the country, every student sooner or later faces the apparently simple task of writing an essay. The essay might focus on a philosophical topic (the argumentative structure of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, for example), or the student's interpretation of a play (Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, say), or a political issue (the likely shape of demographic changes in the United States in the next 20 years). The topics are endless, but the ground rules are not: be clear, employ the rules of logic, and most pointedly, be original.

The last requirement is where the system gets confused. No teacher really expects any student essay to revolutionize our understanding of the world, to be so original that the firmament begins to wobble. The opportunity to be truly original has gotten rarer through the eons. As Mark Twain put it, "What a good thing Adam had. When he said a good thing he knew nobody had said it before." No, originality means something more modest: that the student, after much reflection and weighing of the assembled evidence, has written in a way that reflects the particular contours of his or her thinking. The turns and twists of the prose, the things emphasized and the things neglected, the way the essay opens and closes, and how errors, some small and some large, inevitably infiltrate the prose—these features, constituting the essay's fingerprint, are evidence that the student has written something original. But truth to tell, it's not working that way. Today, lots of students cheat. They use the work of others. They buy essays. They plagiarize. Still, even though the Web makes cheating easier than ever before, and thus more prevalent, the phenomenon of cheating is nothing new. Students have been at it for a long time.

Eighty years ago, Dean Clarence W. Mendell of Yale University declared that the problem of cheating at his school was widespread enough to require instant reform: "It is altogether imperative that the growing disregard of this traditional standard on the part of many unthinking undergraduates should be wiped out." He sternly added,

“the faculty has but one attitude toward cheating, an attitude shared, we believe, by the undergraduate body.” But 45 years later, in 1976, another Yale dean, Eva Balogh, described cheating at the school as “rampant.” New Haven hadn’t changed much, and Yale was no isolated case. That same year, on the other side of the country, the student newspaper at the University of Southern California reported that as many as 40 percent of students there were plagiarizing their written work.

The first comprehensive study of cheating at colleges and universities (5,000 students at almost 100 institutions) was completed in 1964. It found that 75 percent of the students had engaged in one form or another of academic dishonesty. A generation later, in 2001, an authoritative survey conducted by Donald L. McCabe of Rutgers and his colleagues concluded that cheating was now “prevalent” across the country and that “some forms of cheating have increased dramatically in the last 30 years.”

Indeed, every study over the decades has concluded that cheating at American colleges and universities is rampant. Despite Dean Mendell’s desire long ago to wipe it out, grim admonitions from college presidents year after year, and any number of cheating eruptions around the nation, dishonesty, indigenous to almost every campus, flourishes. A recent survey by the online journal *Inside Higher Ed* of more than a thousand chief academic officers at schools nationwide revealed that more than two-thirds of them believe that cheating has become a much worse problem than it once was. But, interestingly enough, fewer than a quarter of them thought it was on the rise on their own campuses.

Students cheat for many reasons, some of them even doing so without malign intent, either because they don’t understand the rules of academic honesty or are confused about the assignment. Some students cheat because of pressures to succeed in a competitive world. Some cheat because they are lazy, tired, or indifferent. Some, overwhelmed by the oceanic wash of information pouring in upon them as they open their computers to the Web, conclude that there is nothing new to say. And some cheat because they look at all academic tasks as exciting opportunities to fool the system as well as the teacher.

They learn early. The Josephson Institute of Ethics sampled more than 40,000 public and private high school students and found that three-fifths of them admitted to having cheated on a test. Nearly half of these were honors students; a third had cheated twice or more in the previous year. In high school, every applicant to college is given an open invitation to cheat—the personal essay that college admissions offices require. How many students write these essays without help? How many parents write them? How many friends, counselors, and commercial agencies write them? No one knows, but the pressure to get such help must be precisely as strong as the pressure to write the kind of essay that will win respect from an admissions dean. The temptation to cross the line shows up early in a young person’s life.

As with any transgressive cultural activity both scorned and widespread (running red lights, using recreational drugs, evading taxes), some cheaters are exposed while others go untouched. For every cheating student who is nabbed, another slips under the radar. Nor is the radar kept in good working order. Some teachers know when a student's work is fraudulent but elect to do nothing. It takes time, and time is expensive; bringing a student before a campus judicial council is also labor intensive, and the outcome is unpredictable; students or their parents can retain attorneys to fight the charges and endlessly complicate the procedure; administrators cannot be counted on to back up professors making accusations. Professors like the elevation of teaching but not the grubby business of prosecuting. For the increasing number of adjunct instructors, vigilance about cheating could put their professional futures at risk. They could earn an unappealing tag: "high maintenance." And some teachers have concluded that the only person hurt by cheating is the cheater, and so they wash their hands of the entire business.

On many campuses, dishonesty is simply accepted as an unwelcome but ubiquitous feature of teaching and learning, the equivalent of friction in the pedagogical machine. Reflect on what Dean Mendell said, but perhaps only dimly understood, all those decades ago. The "unthinking undergraduates" at Yale who were cheating made up part of the undergraduate body at Yale as a whole that presumably shared the faculty's revulsion toward cheating. Denouncing a wrong does not necessarily mean being innocent of committing it. Most students know that cheating surrounds them, but few see ways to do anything about it, even when they hold it in contempt. Some of those who cheat are morally offended by others who cheat, but they too are, for obvious reasons, disinclined to complain. In every cultural domain, we grow accustomed to breaches that, with time and repetition, we wind up believing are normal.

But how does cheating become tolerated, assimilated, and ultimately absorbed into our understanding of normality? The answer partly resides in the peculiar kind of wrong it is. Compared with the violation of copyright, a crime punishable in a court of law, cheating at school is "only" a moral and ethical wrong. Plagiarism, one of the most common forms of cheating, often leaves behind no apparent victim; the author from whose body of work the plagiarist extracts a useful portion might never know anything has happened; and the work, despite the theft, remains in the author's possession (lawyers call this "usufruct"). The downloading without attribution of finished essays from the Internet, another immensely popular way of completing classroom assignments, harms no honest author, as copying them for publication would. And if several students conspire to compose an essay in the name of one, who is the exploited party? Any outrage can seem tolerable if it looks victimless.

Consider, moreover, with what emollients any feeling of guilt about cheating can be soothed in a student's mind. To begin, the culture outside the campus gates seems long ago to have accepted dishonesty when it comes to the writings of certain important people. Just how much of *Profiles in Courage* did John F. Kennedy write

and how much did Theodore Sorensen write? How strongly do we care? What should we say about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s doctoral dissertation at Boston University, once we know that it is filled with the writings of others, copied down paragraph after paragraph, in vast profusion? Think also of Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds, and almost everyone involved in international cycling—sports figures about whom allegations of cheating are now featured in every newspaper in the land. What of the plagiarism of prize-winning historians Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen E. Ambrose, not to mention the elaborate transfer, generations ago, of the ideas of German philosophers into the “philosophy” of Samuel Taylor Coleridge? Don't we just note such derelictions and then generously move on to matters more pressing?

The much-quoted aphorism by T. S. Eliot that “immature poets imitate; mature poets steal” can give license enough to a student faced with the chore of writing an original senior thesis on, say, Eliot himself. That immature student, emboldened by fantasies, can think himself into maturity by doing no more than what Eliot said the great customarily do: steal.

Yet another social reality erodes the moral offensiveness of cheating, a reality that universities and colleges find themselves ill equipped to cope with. Given that so much professional life—the legal and medical systems, entrepreneurial capitalism, the operations of established companies and the public sector, the very working life that many college graduates will enter—is based on the pooling of ideas and the energy of teamwork, how is it that the academic world can demand wholly independent work and originality? Indeed, students can wonder why colleges observe the principles of solitary labor when they will soon work in offices where ideas are meant to be merged and where the inspiration of one person achieves value only when coupled with the inspiration of many others.

Nowhere is this tension between the ethical code of the campus and that of the working world more awkwardly felt than in the discipline of computer science. On campuses, students taking courses in this fertile area of study are urged to work independently to develop their skills, but if they are fortunate enough upon graduation to get a job with a firm making use of such skills, they will join highly ambitious teams of men and women who, to succeed, will merge their talent and their scientific knowledge to create something—a new piece of money-making software, for instance—that not one of them, working alone, could have come up with.

On campus, solitary independence; off campus, collective energy. The contradiction between these two methods partially explains why the greatest incidence of cheating at high-powered universities like Stanford and others occurs among students enrolled in computer science courses. Those students must hold in their minds that a wrong in one place is highly prized in another. Nor is it irrelevant, as one imagines the incentives to cheat, to consider the attractive beginning salaries offered to successful

computer-science graduates of schools such as Stanford. The urge to succeed can yield to the temptation to cheat if a good job awaits just beyond the campus gates.

Few students are ignorant of the prevailing ethical standards of their home institutions. Should those standards be strong and consistently enforced, and should those institutions provide example after example of moral courage, students who cheat do so with the knowledge that they are violating a code of honor that has substance. But if the institutions themselves exhibit questionable ethical standards—leaving a trail of shoddy compromise, corner cutting, and breaches of trust—those students come to understand that honor is only a word and not a practice. Since nothing more quickly leaps into a young person's mind than the recognition of hypocrisy, cheating becomes easier once institutional duplicity is detected.

In colleges and universities, then, where primary teaching duties are given over to part-time instructors so that well-paid professors can devote themselves to research projects; where tuition is very high but certain classes are large and crowded; where extra tutorial help is lavishly provided to students on athletic scholarships (many of whom never would be admitted on academic grounds) and only rarely to students who play no intercollegiate sports; where the values seem to be corporate rather than academic; where, as at Claremont McKenna College, an administrator submits false SAT scores to publications like *U.S. News & World Report* in order to boost the school's "selective" reputation; and where, as a consequence, campus morale is low, some students can and will respond as one would to any organization proclaiming one set of values while practicing another. Students entering colleges and universities are told that these places are, and have been, "special." When they turn out to be commonplace, commonplace standards will triumph.

Students are under personal, parental, and pre-professional pressures that have never been more intense. Getting into the right school, and achieving in such a way that one can then proceed to the next right station in life, makes the college experience for many young people more a matter of getting ahead—acquiring the proper credential—than undergoing a unique ritual devoted to self-knowledge and intellectual growth. If resources beyond oneself are needed to get ahead—even illicit resources such as the writings of others, all easily acquired by a few keyboard strokes in the privacy of one's room, and all gained with no apparent sense of injury to anyone else—so be it. Nothing seems lost; forward motion has been sustained.

The most appalling aspect of the rise of cheating on campus in recent times is that some professors themselves have offered sophisticated defenses of plagiarism. An ambitious student can now turn to the writings of teachers who have made ingenious theoretical defenses for the very cheating practices proscribed by the universities at which they teach. If a student faces the accusation that his work is not original, that student can respond: Don't you know that the idea of "originality" has been hammered into nothingness by thinkers such as Michel Foucault? After all, he proclaimed four decades ago that the very idea of an author, any author, is dead, and

hence there is no one around to claim originality. Instead, wrote Foucault, in *What Is an Author?*, we should welcome a new world in which the inhibiting codes of authorship have been cast to the winds:

All discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur. We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? ... And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?

Once a student adopts, under so impressive an aegis as Foucault, an indifference about authorship, the coast is clear and all noisome ethical restrictions can be jettisoned. *Perspectives on Plagiarism* (1999), edited by Lise Buranen and Alice Myers Roy, brings together essays demonstrating the problem. Gilbert Larochelle, who teaches political philosophy at the University of Quebec and who is a professorial devotee of the celebrated philosopher, puts it this way: "Can plagiarism still exist in an intellectual universe where it has become impossible to differentiate the representation from the referent, the copy from the original, and the copyist from the author?" Another teacher, Debora Halbert of Otterbein College, inspired by both Foucault and feminism, ups the ante and provides students who might be thinking of plagiarizing with dreams of anti-establishment revolution: "Appropriation or plagiarism are acts of sedition against an already established mode of knowing, a way of knowing indebted to male creation and property rights. ... No concept of intellectual property should exist in a feminist future." Yet another professor, Marilyn Randall of the University of Western Ontario, writes that "later critical discourse whole-heartedly adopts the notion of plagiarism as an intentional political act" and, perhaps sensitive to the unattractive connotations of the word itself, repackages plagiarism as "discursive repetition." Buoyed up by such sophisticated arguments, and keen to be part of a bright new future, students might well be ashamed if they did *not* cheat.

A less theoretical defense of cheating comes by way of something called "patchwriting." It combines low-level Foucauldian thinking ("no such thing as originality") with American confessionism ("folks, let's be honest, everybody cheats all the time"). It argues that whatever we write is no more than proof that we are forever standing on the shoulders of giants. We're fooling ourselves if we believe that we are writing something that has not, in so many words, been written before. Human beings can't be original. As a species, we endlessly use and reuse what has been used and reused before, forever recycling the logic, the words, the turns of phrase, and all the rest. So why not, says a chief apologist for patchwriting, go easy on the students? Teach them, says Rebecca Moore Howard of Syracuse University, that it's okay to download essays from the Internet, to pluck useful phrases or even paragraphs from Wikipedia, and to cobble whatever seems to fit together into the semblance of an essay ready for grading. "[Patchwriting] is a form of verbal sculpture,

molding new shapes from preexisting materials,” Howard writes. “It is something that all academic writers do. Patchwriting belongs not in a category with cheating on exams and purchasing term papers but in a category with the ancient tradition of learning through apprenticeship and mimicry.” It’s really how we all write anyway, if only we had the courage as patchwriters to say so.

What explains this peculiar defense of plagiarism? Pedagogical and professional anxiety may be one cause: if we go after cheaters, pursuing them all the way to the judicial councils, we will have done nothing, say the defenders, but reinforce the barriers between teachers and students, the invidious social hierarchies separating those possessing the standards (even if they are ill-paid teachers of composition) and those supplying the tuition (even if they are freshmen and sophomores). In the interests of both candor and classroom egalitarianism, why not let everyone in on the secret about writing: plagiarism is at the heart of prose; it’s how it gets done. Once that forbidden truth is out in the open, genuine teaching can begin. Neither students nor teacher will feel inferior any longer. They will hold in common the abiding truth of writing: it’s all patched together.

And yet. As I have written these words, one by one, knowing all the while that none of them is original with me, all of them (except “usufruct”) drawn from the common well of English diction, and recognizing that neither my sentence construction nor my way of organizing paragraphs is unique to me, and while I have gone to many sources to find the information I’ve needed to write, I believe this essay is mine, mine alone, and would not exist had I not written it. I don’t believe I have patched, or that I’ve plagiarized. As it is with me, so it has always been with writers, and so it will always be. The arguments protecting or even championing plagiarism fall before the palpable evidence of originality, modest and grand, ephemeral and enduring, as it has existed in writing everywhere.

Almost every reader of this essay began, I assume, with the presumption that plagiarism is a serious wrong. Most readers will find its assorted defenders more ridiculous than credible, whether they are disciples of postmodern theory or teachers warning students away from the allegedly phony attractions of originality. Such readers can find kinship, then, with the students who do not cheat. To them we must turn our attention. Both groups have a stake in a clean system. For the students, it means grades honestly earned; for the readers, it means the hope that this country’s educational enterprise is ethically sound. Together the two groups can find much to respect in what another kind of composition teacher, Augustus M. Kolich, expressed a generation ago:

[P]lagiarism cuts deeply into the integrity and morality of what I teach my students, and it sullies my notions about the sanctity of my relationship to students. It is a lie, and although lies are often private matters between two people, plagiarism is never

merely private because it breaches a code of behavior that encompasses my classroom, my teaching, my university, and my society.

Here, then, is the situation: abundant evidence that something is wrong, coupled with an abiding sense that the wrong is pernicious and widespread, and highly resistant to remedies. So, to quote Vladimir Lenin's famous pamphlet (whose title was plagiarized from a novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky): *What Is to Be Done?*

Assuming that something should be done, one response could be to stiffen the apparatus of policing. Internet sites such as "Turnitin," to which students and teachers can submit student work to see if it contains material from essays already on electronic file, could be employed by more and more teachers to track down those who misuse the material. Penalties could be increased; the pursuers could try to become more clever than the pursued; teaching could take on an even more suspicious and hostile attitude. But this plan of attack might well underestimate the resourceful talents of young people—versed as they are in every aspect of the digital world—to outwit even vigilant professorial hawks.

But another strategy already exists. Some institutions, rare but sturdily resolute in spirit, have fought the infection of cheating for decades. Many of them, but hardly all, are small liberal arts colleges. They have had history and tradition at their back. All of them have expended both time and social capital in encouraging honesty and trust. Instead of a campus culture in which adversarial tensions between administrators and students are a given and where cheating is presumed, these institutions convey to the students themselves the authority to monitor the ethical behavior of their classmates. Every student on these campuses is informed, directly and formally, what honor means and why it is important. Every student is presumed to want every classmate to observe the principles of honor. This puts everyone at the same moral starting line. Then students are expected to act as if the work of one is in fact the responsibility of all. Nothing about this is perfunctory. Indeed, at these schools, academic honor is a dominating concern.

Which are these colleges and universities, few in number and proud of their traditions? Washington and Lee, Haverford, Rice, Cal Tech, and the University of Virginia are among them. At some of them, the students themselves hear cases of alleged honor violations and render the judgments with no members of the faculty joining them. Professors note the violation; students then take charge. At such schools, when students cheat, students mete out the justice, which can be swift and uncompromising. At a few of these schools, there exists what is called the "single sanction": any violation of the honor code means permanent expulsion. At all these places, honor has been enshrined as fundamental to the history and the life of the institution. Known to every student who enrolls, the code of honor is already in practice while they matriculate; it is remembered with respect after they graduate. By maintaining such systems, these campuses are less likely to be collections of individuals than, at their best, small societies of truthful men and women. They see the dangers of cheating for

what they are: practices in which many students can be hurt by the dishonesty of a few. And not just students but, in the words of Professor Kolich, the university as a whole, and the larger society beyond the gates.

Can the number of such campuses increase? More than 100 American campuses have some form of honor code already, even if many of them give only lip service to the concept. What would it take to transform classrooms throughout the United States into arenas of moral practice? How would American higher education look then? Might it have in hand one small but powerful argument to turn aside the criticisms hurled against it by those who think that it has lost its ethical bearings and who see it as given over to misplaced values such as pre-professional practicalities or simple-minded political correctness? Such critics—noisy and passionate—might be brought to attention with the news that moral instruction, at the foundation of some of the nation's best schools, had been given a central position at other schools across the country.

If such a reconsideration of one of the essential purposes of higher education were to take place, things on American campuses could begin to seem quite different. Instead of training a suspicious eye on students, professors could turn to them with an understanding of how much they have at stake, and how much they fear they can lose, as long as cheating thrives. In those students who do not cheat resides a core of strength, a habit of mind and morality, thus far employed at too few schools. Those schools should remind themselves of one central fact: at their best, students are dedicated to learning. Students who cheat undermine who they are. At its core, cheating is self-destructive.

The lesson is about students and what they alone can do, not about schools and what they have failed to do. The institutions, after all, can always find ways to walk away from the problem. Although no school welcomes negative publicity about academic dishonesty, administrators can always point the finger downward at those who break the rules. And professors can always distance themselves in the same way. So it is the students who stand at the center of this drama.

Doubters might say that what works at small schools couldn't work at larger ones. Big universities, sprawling with students, promote anonymity, and with anonymity comes blamelessness. At such places, no one is responsible for anything and honor codes are bound to fail. But even big places are composed of individual classes, each taught by one teacher, often in small rooms where, once again, principles of individual honor and personal responsibility can be secured and, once again, those with the most to lose can act to bring honesty to bear. Keep in mind that though universities might be large or small, the average student-teacher ratio today is excellent, according to a 2010 survey by *U.S. News & World Report*: slightly less than 15-to-one, with liberal arts colleges averaging 12.2 students per faculty member, and national universities averaging 15.5 students per faculty member. The numbers are small enough to permit, if not to encourage, local and intimate moral responsibility.

To do nothing is not an answer. Once the emptiness of such a response to so serious a problem is recognized, a form of education beneficial to all can come. To encourage moral awareness is to appreciate what rests at the heart of what it means to teach. In the end, it also rests at the heart of what it means to learn.

Should such a pattern of student responsibility spread more widely across the nation, classroom after classroom will benefit. Students will more fully understand how legitimate societies are established and how they survive—by a consensual agreement that they will govern themselves by rule, by mutual respect, and by vigilance. At that point, universities and colleges will be able to recover some of the trust and respect they have lost. They will be able to say, with authority, that the essential virtue of honorable behavior is both promoted and protected on campus.



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