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Pizza, Professors, and the Code

By Andrew Thompson

A large collection of students, Honor Council members, and Professors Sid Waldman, of Political Science, and Danielle Macbeth, of Philosophy, gathered in Zubrow Commons last Tuesday to discuss the Honor Code and its implications for life at Haverford at Honor Council's second bi-annual installment of Pizza, Professors, and the Code.

Macbeth affirmed the Honor Code's importance for life at Haverford. Learning is about the process, she said. "And I think the honor code helps to put the emphasis on that aspect. It's not the end product, it's getting to the end product."

Waldman, who will be retiring in two years, took the opportunity to give a few concrete examples of the Honor Code during his time at Haverford. "I can speak more truthfully, in giving my own perspective, than perhaps I would if I were to be here for 30 years," he said.

In one instance, a student came to Waldman and admitted she had cheated.

"I was called before the Honor Council, and...the whole process, even with a straightforward 'I cheated, this is how I cheated,' I was astonished at how long it took," said Waldman. "I think the students were trying to be careful."

In another instance Waldman depicted, he was suspicious of plagiarism on a student's paper. He ran the paper through a computer detection program, but the results were inconclusive.

"I did not feel like I could confront the student and say, 'Did you cheat?' without any evidence that they had...I would have felt very awkward," he said.

Waldman concluded, "The party line is to say the Honor Code is great, we all support it, but [there are] a couple of situations where the Honor code took me so far, but no further."

Macbeth emphasized that even without confrontation, "The student is actually hurting themselves," she said. "If you're not doing the work, then you're not learning. It's a bit like not going to practice for a sport, and then still thinking I'll be able to perform well."

Macbeth also expressed the sentiment that, "There are lots of ways to move things forward without confrontation. Confrontation, I think, is really aggressive, and I think that's one of the issues."

"Sometimes when I get a paper that doesn't seem much connected with what we've been doing, I ask the student to re-write it. That seems to be a constructive way to move forward," Macbeth continued.

Waldman agreed that confrontation, and whether or not to do so in given situations, was not well discussed among the faculty. "Faculty don't talk about things that much. I think a lot of people aren't as honest about it."

One student asked about whether the Honor Code stifles class discussion.

“There can be dynamics that are difficult and stand in the way of everyone thriving,” Macbeth responded. “Learning how to have a conversation in a class is huge, and it’s hard, you don’t come into class knowing how to do it. It can be really hard to generate a really constructive room.”

“If people are censoring themselves, it’s a disaster. It goes against so much of what we’re about,” argued Waldman.

“[Then] there are students that are – and I hate to use this word – sort of, obnoxious in the way they discuss [class topics], in the sense that it’s too much, or too frequent in the way they do it,” he continued. Waldman contended that it could pose a problem later on, if no one confronted the student about their behavior in a class.

“The student is doing something that is alienating the other students, and yet the other students aren’t saying anything to that student. I wonder, when that student goes out into the world, and they’re alienating other people, and they don’t know about it. [It’s hard for students to discuss that], even in a friendly way,” Waldman said.

Waldman also expressed discontentment in what happened after Honor Council trials in a relationship between professor and student.

“It was a tragedy. [In one instance,] I read what [the student] wrote [without breaking the Code,] and it was brilliant. After the honor code process, I never saw her again, which wasn’t a surprise. But I actually found it kind of sad,” said Waldman. “It’s not a surprise that if you cheat, and it’s clear that you did, you sort of separate yourself from the professor, but it’s too bad.”

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