

Hierarchies of the Virginia Tech Honor Code: *Twenty Years of Case Studies of the Graduate Honor System*

There are only four actions that can bring a student before the Graduate Honor System: plagiarism, cheating, falsification or academic sabotage. As concepts, these transgressions are easy to understand.

Some of the cases described here are as blatant as a cut-and-paste of text off the web with no intention of attribution. Other cases are more blurred – did the professor effectively communicate that students could work together on projects in class but not on homework assignments? Was this information clearly stated in the syllabus? During an exam, did the foreign student ask another foreign student in their mutual language to borrow a calculator or for an answer? When test answers – and mistakes – are identical from side-by-side desk mates, is collusion always assumed? When one student illicitly obtains another student’s work, copies it and turns both papers in, is it fair to treat both students as the accused? Is it academic sabotage or inexcusable carelessness if a student loses a crucial disk containing work that will take months to replicate?

Penalty also has a hierarchy. In an ideal world it would be in direct proportion to violations of honor. The Graduate Honor System was established to make up for the lack of an ideal world. It will assign an investigator to interview the referrer and the accused, present the case to an investigative board of graduate students and faculty, then determine if the case warrants proceeding to a judicial panel. It is the task of the panel to hear evidence from the student and the referrer, and then decide how to quantify the hierarchies of honor and penalty. While some universities expel all students who are found guilty in cases brought before their Honor System, Virginia Tech’s Graduate Honor System

allows that the human condition is not perfect and that a student faced with the consequences of a questionable moment has a rare opportunity to reexamine the decisions that led to the violation. The Graduate Honor System Constitution ensures that consequences are removed from murky arbitrariness and that fairness reigns over both hierarchies.

Thus the cases described here can be a gauge of what constitutes honor at Virginia Tech. When you help a friend – the one who was in the car accident and has the sick baby at home – with an assignment, what is the consequence? These cases are not intended to expose the larcenous soul, but to reveal how lesser actions, like carelessness, can topple a hierarchy as unreconstructable as honor.

Actions of the Graduate Honor System

There are four actions that the Graduate Honor System can take against a student found guilty of violating the Graduate Honor Code. The actions are in ascending order with Action 1 sanctions considered less punitive than Action 2, 3, and 4 sanctions. Within Action 1 is a range of options that can be sanctioned according to the degree of offense and mitigating circumstances. The majority of cases that come before the Honor System receive Action 1 penalties. A surprising revelation from the histories, one that contributes to Virginia Tech’s decision not to expel all offenders, are the cases brought forward because of confusion over where help is and isn’t permitted on assignments. Both student and professor have the responsibility to make sure they each understand where the line is drawn. For this reason, a number of cases receive Action 1-Part D, a meeting with the Chief Justice and Graduate School Dean for counseling about the Honor System. Action 4 is considered the most serious, and it means permanent dismissal. Sanctions can be appealed under criteria defined in the *Constitution of the Graduate Honor System*, although in the history of the Graduate Honor System, a reversal is extremely rare.

Action 1: Graduate Honor System Probation
For Action 1 sanctions, the Judicial Panel has seven options to consider and can assign all or some of the options as penalty. Parts A and B are mandatory, parts C through G are optional.

- A. The accused shall not be suspended from the University, but shall be placed on Graduate Honor System Probation until graduation or termination of enrollment.
- B. The accused shall also automatically receive a zero on the assignment on which the violation occurred.
- C. A record of the action shall be kept in the folder of the accused (not the official transcript) in the Office of the Registrar until graduation from the University or termination of enrollment.
- D. The accused shall be required to attend a meeting or meetings with the Chief Justice and the Dean of the Graduate School for the purpose of achieving a better understanding on the student's part of the requirements and purpose of the Graduate Honor System.
- E. The accused may be sanctioned to perform an appropriate number of hours (not to exceed 50) of service to the home academic department or other appropriate entities within the university. Failure to perform this service as specified by the Graduate Honor System shall constitute grounds for automatic invocation of part "f". The student was given 50 hours of service.
- F. The notation "placed on Graduate Honor System Probation" will appear on the student's permanent record (transcript) under the semester in which the violation occurred.
- G. Unfair academic advantage was gained, that is to say, the violation undetected, would have led to a substantial grade advantage over other students, then a grade of "F for violation of the Graduate Honor Code" for the course in which the offense occurred will also be a penalty action. This

grade shall appear on the student's grade report and permanent record (transcript) as an "F*", and it shall be a permanent notation.

Following are examples of honor code violations that received Action 1 sanctions.

Plagiarism-Term Paper

A student cut and pasted information from an electronic article to complete a term paper on time. The student provided no citation for the information. Although the student was not suspended, the transgression was severe enough that the student received a zero for the assignment, as well as a permanent F for the course and an F* to appear permanently on the student's transcript because academic advantage would have resulted from the violation. *Action 1, Parts A, B & G.*

Plagiarism-Course Paper

A student copied sentences and other sections verbatim from another source to complete a course paper on time. There was no source citation for the information. The Investigative Board sent the case forward but the Judicial Panel did not mete out as serious a punishment as in the prior case. Here the student received a zero for the assignment, but did not receive a permanent F nor a permanent notation on the transcript. Because it was felt that the student would benefit from a better understanding of the Honor System, a counseling session with the Chief Justice and Graduate School Dean was prescribed. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C & D.*

Plagiarism and Falsification

Two graduate students asked a third student for help on an assignment. The third student assisted the other two by discussing the assignment and photocopying the assignment that the third student had already completed so that the other two students could reference it. The two students' assignments contained identical information to the third student's without citation. The third student had not intended that the work be directly copied. All

three students received sanctions because the syllabus and instructor stated that all assignments were to be individual work. *Action 1, Parts A, B and C.*

Plagiarism-Course Assignment

The student submitted work that was not his or her own in partial fulfillment of the course requirements. Additionally, the student submitted one part of a two-part assignment on behalf of two other students; however, the second student had completed the entire assignment on his/her own and had already turned it in. The penalty was severe because one student had taken the unusual action of submitting work for another student, without that student's knowledge or consent. *Action 1, Parts A, B & G.*

Plagiarism-Research Paper

The student submitted a research paper as the sole fulfillment of the requirements of a course. Although the majority of the paper was the student's own work, the professor discovered many passages that were taken directly from assigned readings but lacked a proper reference. The passages, ranging from three to five sentences each, were identical to the passages in the original works. The student did cite each of the texts in the reference list and used other passages (with proper citation) from each text in the paper. *Action 1, Parts A & B.*

Plagiarism-Final Project

A student used portions of a report, completed in a previous semester by another group of students, to complete a final project. The student was unaware that the work needed to be cited even though it was an unpublished work completed by students. *Action 1, Parts A & B.*

Plagiarism-Course Paper

A student used another student's notes to help with a course paper. In the notes was the other student's paper. The accused student chose to use the paper as an aid to write his/her own paper without the other student's knowledge. Both students received referrals to the Graduate Honor

System. The Investigative Panel was able to determine that one student was not complicit in the plagiarism and charges against that student were dismissed. Charges against the other student were sent to the Judicial Panel, who found that student guilty. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, & D.*

Plagiarism-Term Paper

A student submitted a paper written by that student and a professor at another university. The student removed the co-author's name, made some editorial changes, and submitted the paper as a term paper without giving credit to the co-author. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, & D.*

Plagiarism-Final Project

A student used entire sections of other resources in a final project without citing them. The portions were copied verbatim in the project. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, & D.*

Plagiarism-Report

A student copied large portions of information from a text and other sources in a report. The copied portions were not marked using quotations, where necessary, or cited in the text of the report. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, & D.*

Cheating-Exam

An exam was offered at two different times and the student who took it early reported exact details of the exam to a student who had not yet taken the exam. The student was unprepared for the different format this exam had, compared to others, so the student told another what to expect. The student did not realize this information constituted cheating because specific answers were not given. The student that the information was given to was uncomfortable about receiving this unrequested information and reported the action. *Action 1, Parts A and B.*

Cheating-Final Project

Two students turned in final projects that were word-for-word identical in some portions. One project had a little more detail than the other, so the instructor was able to tell who did the

copying. Both students were aware of what was going on and both were charged with cheating. *Action 1, Parts A, B C, D & F.*

Cheating-Final Exam

Two students were charged with cheating on a final exam. The students were observed, by a third student, talking and looking at each other's exams during the testing period. *Action 1, Parts A and B.*

Cheating-Exam

A student was caught by a proctor looking onto another student's test during an exam. The exams were compared and identical answers and mistakes were found. It was not thought that the student being copied from was aware of the action of the other student and so only the cheating student was charged. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, D & F.*

Cheating-Final Project

A student submitted a take-home final project in partial fulfillment of a course. The problems on the final were assigned from the text. During grading, the professor discovered three problems that had been copied directly from the instructor's solution manual. The student had obtained the manual directly from the publisher, citing a passage in the preface of the text that noted its availability. *Action 1, Parts A and B.*

Cheating-Final Project

Two students were roommates, in the same class, and decided to work on their final project together. The project was to be completed individually, but with the stresses of their workloads they decided to share resources. Along with the resources, the students shared written portions of their projects with each other, which were later identified by the professor. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, & D.*

Cheating, Falsification, & Academic Sabotage

A graduate student was suspected of using notes in a closed book final exam. This suspicion led the professor to request that all material would be collected with the exams (including the

scratch paper that was allowed). One of the students was resistant to give up the notes. After collecting all of the material, the notes were left in an unattended office. When the professor returned, two students were seen coming out of the office. The professor noticed that the notes of the cheating student had been removed from the office. One student had been requested by the other to help and get the notes out of the office. Portions were not returned and some were destroyed. *Action 1, Parts A, B, F and G.*

Cheating-Homework

Two students turned in very similar homework assignments. Similar formats and style existed in each assignment. The professor was able to tell which student copied from the other due to the detail provided. *Action 1, Parts A, B & D.*

Cheating-Quiz

A student was caught using notes and books on a web-based quiz being taken in a common computer lab. The syllabus clearly stated that no additional resources or help from classmates could be used while taking the quiz. *Action 1, Parts A, B and C.*

Cheating-Take Home Final Exam

Two students showed identical answers to a majority of the questions on a take home final exam. The exam required the students to work independently. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C & D.*

Cheating-Homework

Two students turned in individual homework assignments that had answers that matched, in part and sometimes completely, the answers given in the instructor's manual. The students gained access to the manual on the World Wide Web by finding the web page of the same class taught by a different instructor in a previous semester. *Action 1, Parts A, B and D.*

Cheating-Group Project

This case resulted in different penalties being sanctioned within the same case.

Three students were involved in a group project. One student obtained information that could be

used on the project from a class in the previous semester. As a group, the students agreed to use the information. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C & D (for students who agreed to use the information), Action 3 (for student who obtained the information).*

Cheating-Homework

Two students completed a homework assignment, individually, using old homework answer sheets from the previous semester to obtain the answers. It was stated clearly in the syllabus that the use or reference to previously published homework solutions from the course was not authorized. *Action 1, Parts A, B and D.*

Cheating-Homework

Several graduate students were charged with cheating on a homework assignment. The students were allowed to confer among each other to discuss problem solving strategies and to check answers. However, the professor specifically forbade direct copying. Cheating was identified because the same odd mistake showed up in all the students' assignments. *Action 1, Parts A, B and D.*

Cheating-Exam

This case is one of the few where a Part E-Action 1 sanction was imposed. A student was caught cheating during an in-class closed book/closed notes exam. A teaching assistant observed the student using a sheet of notes. The student chose to take this course of action when the difficulty of the exam was noticed. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, D and E.*

Cheating-Take Home Exam

Three students submitted a take-home exam and the professor identified identical erroneous solutions. The students found portions of the exam very difficult and in a panic to turn it in on time, consulted with each other to attempt obtaining the correct answers. *Action 1, Parts A and B.*

Cheating-Class Project

Two students turned in a class project with some similar and identical portions. It was clearly stated that students were not to work together on the assignment. With the stresses of work, school and life for one student, and the willingness of the other student to help out a friend, they were both caught cheating. *Action 1, Parts A and B.*

Cheating -Exam

Two students were cheating on a final exam. The professor was given a tip about the cheating by a member of the academic community. While grading the exams, the professor found that on the last problem there were similar and even identical portions in the exams of the two students. Linguistic errors were made that made it clear that the answers were copied. According to the professor, the answers could not have come from a third resource. *Action 1, Parts A, B and C.*

Falsification-Altering Exam

After taking an exam and receiving a grade on a test given in a course taught by two professors, the student altered the already graded exam to receive additional credit from the professor that did not grade the exam. *Action 1, Parts A, B, C, D, and F.*

Action 2: Suspension in Abeyance

All parts of an Action 2 penalty are mandatory. Mitigating factors determine whether a student receives a sanction of Suspension in Abeyance or Suspension. In Action 2 the student's suspension starts the following semester and the student does not lose credit for the currently enrolled semester, except for the class in which the offense occurred.

- A. The accused shall be allowed to remain in the University to complete the semester in which the offense occurred or in which the hearing is held.

- B. The penalty shall automatically include a grade of “F for violation of the Graduate Honor Code” for the course (or equivalent) in which the offense occurred. This grade shall appear on the student’s grade report and permanent record (transcript) as an “F*”, and it shall be a permanent notation.
- C. After the completion of the semester as specified in item (a) above, the accused shall be suspended for a period not to exceed two (2) successive semesters or one (1) full academic year as specified by the official notification of the University action.
- D. The notation “suspended for violation of the Graduate Honor Code” shall appear on the student’s permanent record (transcript) under the semester in which the violation occurred.
- E. Upon the accused’s re-enrollment at Virginia Tech at the end of the period of suspension, the student shall be placed on Graduate Honor System Probation (Action 1, Part A only) until graduation or termination of enrollment.

Following are examples of honor code violations that received Action 2 sanctions.

Plagiarism and Cheating-Take Home Exam

A student received assistance on a take-home exam by e-mailing the questions to a friend in the same profession outside of the university. The answers given to the student were used verbatim in the exam. Upon turning in the exam, the student also signed an honor code statement saying that help was neither given nor received on the exam. *Action 2, all parts mandatory.*

Plagiarism and Falsification-Report

A graduate student plagiarized significant portions of a project and report in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a non-thesis option Masters degree. Text, data, and figures were used, and not cited, from another student’s report and from many other sources. *Action 2, all parts mandatory.*

Falsification – Forged Letter

A student falsified a letter of recommendation to another university using an advisor’s name who was unaware of the letter. The letter was also sent out with a forged signature. *Action 2, all parts mandatory.*

Action 3: Suspension

(All parts of an Action 3 sanction are mandatory).

- A. Suspension is immediate and the student shall not be allowed to complete the current semester. In addition, the accused shall be suspended for a period not to exceed two (2) successive academic semesters or one (1) full academic year following the current semester (as specified under Article V, Section 1, item 3 of this constitution).
- B. All credits shall be lost for work done during the semester in which the student is currently enrolled. The penalty shall automatically include a grade of “F for violation of the Graduate Honor Code” for the course (or equivalent) in which the offense occurred. This grade shall appear on the student’s grade report and permanent record (transcript) as an “F*”, and it shall be a permanent notation.
- C. The notation “suspended for violation of the Graduate Honor Code” shall appear on the student’s permanent record (transcript) under the semester in which the violation occurred.
- D. Upon the accused’s re-enrollment at Virginia Tech at the end of the period of suspension, the student shall be placed on Graduate Honor System Probation (Action 1, Part A only) until graduation or termination of enrollment.

Following are examples of honor code violations that received Action 3 sanctions.

Cheating- Take Home Exam

A take-home exam was given with directions that the work was to be completed on an

individual basis. The students were allowed to discuss the material with the instructor only and signed an agreement to this. The professor noticed that two students had identical portions on their exams. It was determined that one student had directly copied from the other.

Action 3, all parts mandatory.

Falsification –Fictitious Resume

A student sent a resume to another university applying for an assistantship. The student reported false information regarding GPA, funding for other assistantships, and publications (which were never published and not intended to be published). *Action 3, all parts mandatory.*

Academic Sabotage-Research Project

A student sabotaged a research project by hiding and altering software in a purposeful manner. The project was extremely delayed and large portions of data had to be reconstructed. The software belonged to the state and the University. *Action 3, all parts mandatory.*

Action 4: Permanent Dismissal

- A. The accused shall be permanently dismissed from the University without being allowed to complete the current semester.
- B. All credits shall be lost for work done during the semester in which the student is currently enrolled. In addition, if the offense did not occur during the semester in which the hearing is held, then a grade of “F” for violation of the Graduate Honor Code” shall be assigned for the course in which the offense was committed. This grade shall appear on the student’s grade report and permanent record (transcript) as an “F*”, and it shall be a permanent notation.
- C. The accused may never re-enroll in the University.
- D. The notation “permanently dismissed for violation of the Graduate Honor Code” shall appear on the student’s permanent

record (transcript) under the semester in which the violation occurred.

Following are examples of honor code violations that received Action 4 sanctions.

Cheating-Take Home Exam

A student submitted a written take-home exam in partial fulfillment of the course requirements. On grading the exams, the professor noted striking similarities between the exams of two students. The first student acknowledged removing an exam from the professor’s mailbox (without the knowledge of the other student) and using that exam to complete the paper.

This same student had been convicted previously for an Honor Code violation. *Action 4, all parts mandatory.*

Falsification-Credentials

A student applied for a graduate research assistantship. The application included falsified credentials on the academic vitae. Dates of graduation were not included, which tipped off those examining the vitae. *Action 4, all parts mandatory.*

Falsification-Altered Transcript

A student requested a course transfer to apply credit from a class at another university to a class at Virginia Tech. The student provided false information in an altered transcript included with the course transfer request. The student had never taken the course that was requested for transfer credit. *Action 4, all parts mandatory.*

Academic Sabotage

A student stole a computer from a computer lab that appeared to not be used. The computer contained research data and the academic work of another student. The accused student unknowingly removed that information from the computer, which was not completely recoverable. Along with University charges, the student faced state charges. *Action 4, all parts mandatory.*

Dismissal of Charges

At times a case is referred to the Honor System and the charges against the student are dismissed. This situation can occur if there is not enough evidence to support the charges, or in cases of genuine misunderstanding that is clarified by the Investigative Board. Charges may be dismissed by the Investigative Board, or in the next procedural step by the Judicial Panel. The Honor System provides an opportunity and procedures for proving guilt or innocence. Accused students may bring an advocate or witness(es) with them to explain charges. Students who need help in locating an advocate can contact the advisor to the Graduate Honor System for consultation.

Following are examples of honor code charges that were dismissed.

Cheating- Homework

Three students turned in a homework assignment with a shared uncommon mistake. Although the professor allowed students to confer as a group on homework assignments, the work had to be submitted individually. *Dismissal of Charges - In this case the Investigative Panel found that there was not enough evidence to support the charges, therefore the case was not referred to the Judicial Panel.*

Cheating- Homework

Two students were referred for copying a homework assignment because of a similar grammatical error on both papers. Random homework assignments were collected from other students for comparison. *Dismissal of Charges - Although the Investigative Panel found that the charges should be sent forward to the Judicial Panel, after hearing the testimonies of the referrer and the accused the students were found not guilty and charges were dismissed.*

Note about Case Histories

The cases in this document were drawn from cases over a twenty-year period. They are not exhaustive of the cases that have appeared before the Graduate Honor System, nor are they presented in any kind of chronological order. Details that may have identified a particular student were deliberately removed because of the condition of confidentiality provided by the Graduate Honor System. It is difficult to read these cases and understand why such similar charges received such diverse sanctions. Only the Investigative and Judicial Panels examined the evidence and know the answers that led to the distinctions in punishment. Virginia Tech encourages open dialog about the Graduate Honor system. The Chief Justice can also provide information to students and classes upon request and is available to make presentations at any time at the main campus and at extended campus sites.

Contact the Graduate Honor System

Please feel free to contact the Chief Justice, the Graduate Dean, or the Advisor to the Graduate Honor System to keep the dialog going. Inquiries can be directed to ghs@vt.edu, or by calling 540-231-4558.

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Prepared by the Graduate School with thanks to graduate student Theresa Enyeart Smith for compiling and writing the case summaries. (2002)

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