

Are Students Ready for the Honor System?

Allen Smith

The mere suggestion of instituting the "honor system" into today's schools raises some serious and thought-provoking questions. We should determine both the value and feasibility of such a system, and the nature of the society into which it would be introduced. First, let us look at the system itself.

An honor system places all the responsibility of honesty on the individual student. Theoretically, this system should strengthen the student's sense of values and make him less susceptible to cheating. The basic assumption, however faulty it may be, is that if a student is given this freedom, surely he would not abuse it by cheating. But this reasoning has been proven repeatedly to be false!

A professor in a Midwestern university, after hearing of widespread cheating on campuses across the nation, decided to conduct an experiment to test the honesty of his students. He gave them a difficult assignment and announced there would be a quiz. On the day of the test, he remarked that the correct answers were on his desk. Then on some pretext, he was called from the room.

He had taken the precaution to enroll two graduate students to observe what would happen when he left the room. Almost as soon as he was out the door, there was a stampede to the desk. All the students of the class, except the graduate students, copied the answers to the quiz and handed them in as their own.

Jerome Ellison, in his article "American Disgrace: College Cheating," says, ". . . original written work, sometimes slightly used or from other campuses, was available at four to ten dollars per paper; tutors (students) would perform any kind of homework at moderate fees; complete laboratory notes could be obtained in advance through theft, pilfering of wastebaskets near duplicating machines, or bribery of of staff employes. One student expressed the consensus: 'At this school, cheating is standard practice.' "

The book *Changing Values in College*, an extensive survey of student attitudes by Philip E. Jacob of Pennsylvania University, says, "the chinks in the moral armor of American students are most obvious in regard to cheating. . . . The practice is so widespread as to challenge the well-nigh universal claim of students that they value honesty as a moral virtue. Frequent cheating is admitted by forty per cent or more

(of the students) at a large number of colleges, often with no apology or sense of wrongdoing.”

This scathing indictment of college students is apparently well-founded, but to get a true picture of the situation we must look at another factor—the nature of our society. Today, a great emphasis is placed on “getting ahead” in the business world. Business practices, either illegal or bordering on the dishonest, are frequent. Tax loopholes, over-pricing of articles, and loan-sharking are recognized by most adults only as ways of making “the almighty dollar.”

In a society that condones this kind of behavior, why should we be shocked when we learn of students cheating? They are only imitating the conduct of adults. Dr. Edward D. Eddy, Jr., vice-president and provost of the University of New Hampshire, told a discussion group that cheating throughout the country “has become a part of the student culture—it’s taken for granted.”

Clearly, if this is the condition of our society, then the “honor system” has no place in it. This is not to say that the honor system is not a good system, only that it is idealistic. Before such a system can be instituted in our schools, the opinions of society on what is honest and dishonest must be radically changed.

You and Me

Vicki Kessinger

Face that must press against the cold damp sweat of roughly-hewn
stones,
Swollen lips kissing the razor’s edge,
Tender feeling wrapped in barbed wire,
Seared conscience galloping through cow pastures
The embrace of severed arms.