



A DCI Fellows Project

The Honor Code

***How can we establish a more robust culture of
academic integrity at Davidson?***

The purpose of the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) Fellows Program is to empower faculty, staff, and student fellows to use deliberation to help foster understanding and catalyze progress on contentious issues, one conversation at a time. One goal of the program is to give Fellows the frameworks and tools that will empower them to independently host and facilitate productive deliberations. As part of the program, DCI Fellows therefore complete individual deliberative projects to apply what they have learned to unique contexts specific to their interests.

This project is the work of DCI Senior Fellow LJ Phillips '25 and DCI Fellows Isabella Neri '27 and Cavan Klein '27, who wrote this guide to provide background information to participants, consisting of students, faculty, and staff. They are hosting a related Campus Conversation in collaboration with the Student Government Association, Honor Council, and the Dean of Students Office.

Format for Deliberation

Before the Deliberation

- I. Settling in and Getting Food (10 Min.)
- II. Introduction and Overview from Co-Hosts (15 Min.)

During the Deliberation

- I. Getting to Know Each Other (5 Min.)
- II. Setting Expectations (5 Min.)
- III. Understanding Academic Integrity (10 Min.)
- IV. Evaluating Our Culture (10 Min.)
- V. Weighing Arguments For and Against Upholding Academic Integrity (10 Min.)
- VI. Deliberating On How to Foster a Culture We Think is Important (20 Min.)
- VII. Reflections (10 Min.)

Introduction

The Chronicle of Higher Education published an article in November of 2024 discussing the rise in cheating in academia and how cheating has become normal. According to the article, the meaning of academic integrity has been lost in some way across colleges throughout the country.¹ One of the teachers in the article is quoted saying that the lack of care for academic integrity and honor has become so widespread that it is a “culture.” The purpose of this deliberation guide and the associated Campus Conversation is to foster a conversation in which students, faculty, and staff can talk candidly about these dynamics in the context of Davidson College. The guide first explores the concept of academic integrity and what a culture of academic integrity might look like, then examines to what extent we have such a culture at Davidson and what are some of the currently most common perspectives about academic integrity. It concludes with a summary of potential options moving forward with regard to fostering a more robust culture of academic integrity at Davidson.

What is a culture of academic integrity?

According to the UNC Writing Center, academic integrity is the commitment to and demonstration of honest and moral behavior in an academic setting.² A culture of academic

¹ “[Cheating Has Become Normal](#).” The Chronicle of Higher Education. 2024.

² “[Academic Integrity](#).” The Writing Center at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 2025

integrity embodies this definition of academic integrity. Students are devoted to upholding ethical behavior in the academic setting.

Some particular aspects of a culture that is committed to academic integrity involve particular virtues and responsibilities. Students feel a pride in doing one's work and respect the work of others. By adhering to this culture and having integrity, we are not giving ourselves an unfair advantage that others do not have. There is a shared trust amongst faculty and students when an institution has this culture. A culture goes beyond just the individual behavior of students but a collective effort and attitude toward maintaining academic integrity.

The honor code is intended to embody this culture of academic integrity at Davidson. The honor code binds each Davidson student to refrain from stealing, lying about College business, and cheating on academic work. Stealing is the intentional taking of any property without right or permission. Lying is intentional misrepresentation in any form. Cheating is any practice, method, or assistance that involves any degree of dishonesty, fraud, or deceit, whether explicitly forbidden or unmentioned. Cheating includes plagiarism, which is representing another's ideas or words as one's own.³

Unlike the student code of responsibility, the honor code only applies in academic contexts like exams, essays, projects, etc. However, the code of responsibility and honor code do complement each other in maintaining a campus culture of integrity in academics and campus life more generally.

There is also a debate about how the use of generative AI should be incorporated into a culture of academic integrity. AI raises questions about whether the use of it challenges or diminishes such a culture, and to what extent students should be allowed or encouraged to use it in their academic work.

What is the culture now at Davidson College?

The honor code has been a prominent feature of Davidson's educational system since its inception during Davidson's formation in 1837. Additionally, the Honor Council, established in 1959, is a student-run organization that holds students accountable to the Honor Code's regulations.⁴ The Honor Council consists of elected students who ultimately make the decisions regarding their peers' violations of honor code policies. Additionally, other institutions such as

³ "[The Code of Responsibility](#)." Davidson College. 2025.

⁴ "[Honor Code](#)." Davidson College. 2025.

Rollins College, Haverford College, and the U.S. Naval Academy have student-run Honor Councils.⁵

When a student is accused of violating the Honor Code, the Honor Council uses a complaints/reports system in order to address these claims. According to the 2024-2025 Student Handbook, the Honor Council reviews alleged violations outlined in submitted complaints and information reports.

The 2024-25 Student Handbook outlines the following possible resolution options:

1. **“No Action:** If there is no basis to file charges and no follow-up is warranted, the Dean of Students Office may close the case and take no action.
2. **Interim Action:** The College may authorize interim actions, which include but are not limited to no contact orders, housing relocation, and interim restrictions, prior to the resolution of a matter under these Procedures. Learn more about Interim Actions in the Code of Disciplinary Procedures.
3. **Non-Disciplinary Responses:** If it is determined that disciplinary action is not warranted, the matter may be handled with a Warning Letter, a Restorative Conference, or a Student Solicitor Conference.
4. **Disciplinary Responses:** If it is determined that disciplinary action is warranted, the matter may be handled through an Honor Council Mutual Resolution Conference, and if not resolved at the conference, will be resolved through an Honor Council hearing.
5. **Withdrawal of Charges:** The Dean of Students Office has the authority to withdraw allegations once they have been made.”⁶

Within the last couple of years, there has been a decrease in satisfaction with the functionality and usefulness of the Honor Code. There is a sense among many faculty that the incidents of cheating have increased in recent years, and many have taken actions to reduce these incidents. Some have refrained or reduced the number of take-home exams that they offer, for example, and students have noticed this change over time. Some students report that their classmates are more willing to cheat, more willing to talk about their cheating, and less willing to report their classmates’ cheating than when they arrived at Davidson.

Because of this dynamic, new discussions about possible solutions to this problem have been occurring. One such solution could be allowing or encouraging faculty to handle violations on their own. Some problems regarding this solution would be the lack of tracking repeat offenses across classes and the lack of the most serious consequences (such as suspension or expulsion)

⁵“[Keepers of the Code: AI, Cheating, Academic Integrity and College Honor Councils.](#)” Davidson College. 2024.

⁶ “Student handbook 2024-2025.” Davidson College. 2024.

that may not adequately incentivize students to follow the Honor Code. Additionally, professor punishments may vary, leading to unequal treatment for violations. Some benefits of this system may include more tailor-made solutions to specific issues and quicker resolution of cases, as Student Honor Council cases can be difficult to resolve during busy times of the semester or over winter or summer breaks.

In the Fall of 2024, according to data provided by the Office of the Vice President for Student Life in early 2025, a total of 22 complaints were filed for honor code violations. Of these 22 complaints, 19 were for cheating and 3 for lying and/or stealing. These complaints were resolved in the following ways: mutual resolution (5), Honor council hearings (3), no charges brought or not responsible (3), and still in progress from Fall '24 (11). Out of the 8 students found accountable, 7 of them accepted responsibility. From the fall semester of 2024, the most common accountability plans were as follows:

- Campus Office referral
- Follow-up discussion with either the Honor Council or a faculty member
- Letter of apology
- Reflective essay
- Grade change for assignment/exam or overall course
- Office hours with a faculty member or a TA

What are some different perspectives on academic integrity?

Academic integrity policies have historically played a crucial role in shaping the educational experience at Davidson College. While the Honor Code has long been a defining feature of the institution, concerns among students, faculty, and staff about its effectiveness, enforcement, and impact on students have increased in recent years. This section outlines key arguments both supporting and questioning the importance of academic integrity. We will examine its role in preserving the value of education, ensuring accountability, and preparing students for life beyond college. At the same time, we should consider concerns about the burden of reporting, personal justifications for dishonesty, and alternative models used by other institutions. Some of these viewpoints are unspoken, assumed, or only expressed in private conversations; the assumption of this guide is that it is essential that we engage publicly with them so that we can examine their underlying reasoning and implications.

Arguments Supporting the Importance of Academic Integrity

Preserving the Value of Education

- Academic integrity ensures that degrees accurately reflect students' efforts and knowledge.
- Declining academic integrity could weaken the credibility of Davidson degrees and impact students' future opportunities.
- Institutions known for academic dishonesty may face reputational damage, affecting students' prospects for graduate school and employment.
- Students may regret cheating later in life when they realize they did not really earn their degree or the grades associated with it.

Teaching the Importance of Trust and Mutual Accountability

- Faculty members reinforce academic integrity through course policies and syllabi.
- President Doug Hicks' recent communication to students about the college's commitment to honesty in academics reinforces the idea that the Honor Code is "the bedrock of our community of trust."
- The Honor Council exists to uphold institutional standards and ensure fair accountability for violations.
- Without enforcement, dishonesty can become normalized, disadvantaging students who are working to uphold a culture of academic integrity.

Building Good Habits for Life Beyond College

- Academic integrity fosters ethical decision-making, a critical skill in professional and personal settings.
- Many employers and graduate programs value integrity as a fundamental characteristic in candidates.
- Alumni perspectives may provide insight into how Davidson's Honor Code shaped their careers and ethical decision-making.

Arguments Questioning the Importance of Academic Integrity

Highlighting the Burden of Reporting Violations

- Many students hesitate to report peers due to potential social consequences.
- Reporting a friend could strain or end relationships, discouraging students from upholding the Honor Code.
- Current Honor Council processes may prolong uncertainty for accused students, adding stress to their academic experience.

Viewing the Decision to Cheat as a Personal Choice

- Some students believe academic dishonesty only affects them and not the broader community.
- Perspectives such as “If everyone else is doing it, why shouldn’t I?” contribute to a culture where cheating is rationalized.

Citing the “I Worked Hard to Get Here” Justification

- Some students feel that their efforts in high school earned them the right to take a more relaxed approach to academic integrity in college.
- The pressures of maintaining academic performance may lead students to deprioritize academic integrity in favor of opting for convenience, doing well, and preserving their mental health.

Justifying Cheating as a Response to Academic Pressure

- Students may rationalize dishonesty when stakes are high, such as in high-pressure grading environments.
- At institutions with strict grading policies, the fear of failure may encourage students to cheat as a means of self-preservation.

Why Do Some Schools Not Have Honor Codes?

Some colleges and universities choose not to implement formal honor codes, opting instead for faculty-driven or staff-managed enforcement mechanisms. These institutions may believe that academic integrity is best upheld through structured policies and direct oversight from professors and the administration rather than relying on student-led accountability. Without an honor code, faculty members often take on the responsibility of monitoring academic honesty, which can lead to more immediate interventions and consistent enforcement.

Critics of honor codes argue that they place too much responsibility on students to police one another, which can create uncomfortable social dynamics.⁷ The expectation for students to report their peers may lead to conflicts, distrust, and hesitancy to uphold academic standards. Some institutions believe that fostering a culture of integrity through faculty mentorship and administrative policies is a more effective approach than a student-enforced system.

Additionally, schools may find that honor codes are difficult to enforce uniformly.⁸ The effectiveness of an honor system depends on the willingness of students to abide by its rules

⁷ Gary Pavela. 2013. [Do Honor Codes Work?](#) Character Education. Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.

⁸ Toni Merhar et al. 2024. [The Evolution of Collegiate Honor Codes](#). *Journal of Character and Leadership Development*.

and report violations of those rules, which can vary widely across different institutions. Without consistent enforcement, honor codes may become symbolic rather than functional. As a result, these schools may prefer alternative approaches, such as requiring faculty proctoring during exams, using plagiarism detection software, or implementing strict academic misconduct policies at the institutional level.

What should we do now to foster a culture of academic integrity if we think it's important?

As previously outlined, there are many potential solutions that could make Davidson's culture of academic integrity more robust. Some of the solutions that may be considered are as follows:

1. **No exceptions policy** – Students are allowed one violation; if they are found to be in violation under the Honor Council system, they are expelled from Davidson College.
2. **Harsher penalties** – Stronger penalties could be those that impact student academics more significantly. These could include failing a class, removal of scholarships, dismissal from an academic program or co-curricular opportunity, or suspension for one or more semesters.
3. **More clear and substantive restorative justice processes** – Reforms could focus on clarifying the Honor Code regulations, policies, and practices. Many students are not clearly aware of what the Honor Code entails and what its ramifications are if violated. Articulating the different options and consequences for students may reduce the number of violations.
4. **More mediated processes (“mutual resolution”) rather than Honor Council processes** – Finding a middle ground between professors and students with more opportunities for mutual understanding between parties involved.
5. **Faculty/staff-based model** – Moving towards a staff model without a student-run honor council could reduce the burden on student honor council representatives and decrease the delays associated with student schedules and breaks.
6. **Dissolve the Honor Council completely** – In this model, professors resolve issues of cheating on their own and/or issues of stealing and lying become violations of the Student Code of Responsibility that are managed by the Dean of Students Office.

Consider these and other options as you prepare to deliberate in your small group discussions.

Setting Expectations (5 min.)

Deliberative Dispositions

The DCI has identified several “deliberative dispositions” as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a commitment to egalitarianism, open mindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available on the DCI website.⁹

Conversation Agreements

In entering this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgements
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., “All people think this,” or “No educated people hold that view”)

⁹ “Key Deliberative Dispositions.” Deliberative Citizenship Initiative.
<https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>. 2025.

Getting to Know Each Other (5 Minutes)

In this section, we will take less than a minute to share our names, two interesting things about yourselves, and brief answers to the questions below.

1. What is a recent example where you have succeeded at something?
2. What is a recent example where you have failed at something?

Understanding Academic Integrity (5 Minutes)

In this section, we will discuss the characteristics of academic integrity as they relate to Davidson College. We can consider our own perspectives as well as those around us to get a grasp of where we are as a community. This will be followed by an open conversation to allow for crosstalk, as time allows.

- What do you think are the most important characteristics of a culture of academic integrity (ex: trust, honesty, accountability, grace, etc.)?

Evaluating Our Culture (10 Minutes)

In this section, we will share our thoughts on the culture in Davidson surrounding the Honor code. Let's reflect on our understanding of the honor code is and how it is perceived. We will each take about one minute to answer one of the questions below without crosstalk. After everyone has spoken, we will open up the discussion for crosstalk about what others may have said or what questions may have arisen.

1. What does the Honor Code mean to you right now?
2. Do you feel that the Honor Code is fulfilling its purpose?
3. Can you share an experience/example where you have noticed the Honor Code being questioned or ignored?
4. Does the number of Honor Code violations change whether or not we perceive it to be working?

Weighing Arguments For and Against Upholding Academic Integrity (10 Minutes)

In this section, we will discuss arguments for and arguments against upholding the importance of academic integrity. We will each take 1-2 minutes to answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has shared their initial thoughts, we will open up the floor for further discussion based on what others have said.

1. Should there be greater accountability for upholding academic integrity? Why or why not?
2. Which arguments are most convincing, and why?
3. Which arguments are least convincing, and why?
4. Is academic integrity primarily an individual responsibility, or should it be enforced through institutional mechanisms?
5. What role should faculty and the administration play in reinforcing academic integrity?
6. What can Davidson learn from schools that do not have honor codes? Are there alternative approaches that might be more effective?

Deliberating on How to Foster a Culture We Think is Important (20 Minutes)

Creating a culture that students value is something that the honor code strives to do. With this in mind, we can consider what we should do as faculty and students to sustain this culture on campus. We will each take a minute to go around answering one of the following questions. Once everyone has answered, we will then move to discussion and crosstalk based on our answers to the following questions.

1. How could Davidson create a more clear and substantive process for punishment of Honor Code violations?
2. What should mutual resolution look like between students, faculty, and staff?
3. Would punishments such as a no exceptions policy, suspension, or automatic class failure breathe new life into the Honor Code?
4. Are there some punishments that are too extreme?
5. Would discontinuing the Honor Council create a better system for determining disciplinary action toward students, or would it create bigger problems between faculty and students?

Reflections (10 Minutes)

While today's conversation is an important step in the journey, effectively managing the difficulties facing democracy is necessarily an ongoing effort. Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group is welcome to continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

- 1) What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
- 2) Where are the areas of both agreement and disagreement in your group?
- 3) Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you as we have talked today?
Any new ideas that might transcend our current way of conceiving of the problems and potential solutions?
- 4) Was there anything that was said or left out from the discussion that you think should be addressed with the group? Are there any perspectives missing from this conversation that you feel would be important to hear?
- 5) What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations about academic integrity?
- 6) Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the deliberation you just had?