

A MATTER OF HONOR

*By Bonnie Blackburn
Penhollow '84*

THIS WE BELIEVE:
THAT PERSONAL HONOR
IN WORD AND DEED,
PERSONAL INTEGRITY IN
THOUGHT AND ACTION,
HONESTY IN EVERY
FACET OF LIFE, AND RESPECT FOR
OTHER PEOPLE AND THEIR RIGHTS
ARE THE ESSENCE OF A STUDENT OF
THE TAFT SCHOOL.

—FROM THE HONOR CODE



It's a simple enough phrase: "I pledge my honor" or even simply "I Pledge." Many of us wrote it almost as an afterthought, something as automatic as the date or our names at the top of an assignment.

And yet that simple statement—"I pledge my honor that I have neither given nor received aid on this examination"—provides the foundation upon which Horace Taft's vision for the development of his students was laid.



EDUCATING THE WHOLE BOY

Horace Taft's vision for his school was a place where young men (and later young women) would be educated not only in academics but also in character, values, and morals. The school's first Honor Code, proposed in 1913, was "an agreement among gentlemen, and not under the supervision of the faculty."

"I think what Mr. Taft was trying to establish," adds Dick Cobb, who heads

the Honor Court, "is what we're trying to maintain with our Honor Code now—the principles we're trying to uphold: honesty, integrity. It's something that's been part of the school for nearly a century, and I think it works. I think the kids buy into it. It's there because they developed it. They push it. Because it's not accepted among students to violate the Honor Code, it makes our job really easy."

"The Honor Code creates the comfort that we have with each other," says senior Laura McLaughlin. "I can leave my backpack in the hall and not worry; my boarding friends all leave their rooms unlocked. Part of the reason, I'm sure, is that the school chooses kids who value their integrity, who internalize those values already."



BY STUDENTS, FOR STUDENTS

The Honor Code has been updated several times—in 1941, 1961, and most recently in 1982. Tom Blum '82 was part of the group of monitors who developed the most recent changes.

"The Honor Code is an invitation for students to exercise greater, really adult responsibility for their actions as they



get closer to entering the ‘real world,’” Blum says. “It’s an opportunity to deepen their understanding that respect for one’s peers, an appreciation of intellectual and academic honesty, and trustworthiness are pillars of cooperation and promoters of just and equitable behavior within a society. The Honor Code presents students with their first exposure to the legalistic boundaries and processes that will be a part of adult life: If you violate the code, there may be consequences.”

These days, it seems there are no consequences in the white-collar world many Taft students inhabit. But as national scandals such as the collapse of Enron, corruption in Washington and allegations of lying and illegalities reach the highest levels of government and the private sector, is there still a place for honor codes such as Taft’s?

Of course, says Taft Headmaster Willy MacMullen ’78.

“That our expectations of honesty run counter to much of what students experience in our culture is only a reminder of how important our work is here,” he says. “When Horace Taft created the school, the ethical education was as important as the intellectual. This is what it means to educate the whole student.

“In every sense, the Honor Code is the cornerstone to this place. It guides so much of what we do, and no year goes by without my speaking explicitly to the community about the importance of honor—in our personal as well as academic lives,” MacMullen adds. “I cannot tell you the pride I feel for this school in this regard: for the students today and for those who came before who bequeathed such an important legacy.”

“Maybe here kids don’t cheat because they fear the consequences, at first,” adds Laura, “but after that—once you see the environment—you value it for itself. We know Taft would be less ‘Taft’ if kids cheated and there weren’t an honor code.”



FACING CONSEQUENCES

Head monitor Michael Shrubbs ’06 says before he came to Taft, cheating was the norm.

“I was at a school where cheating was the usual,” he explains. “There was no way a teacher could leave class without the students cheating. I cheated in my old school, not much at all, but I did. I have been here at Taft for three and a half years now and haven’t cheat-

ed once. Taft and the Honor Code have showed me how important one’s honor really is. I wouldn’t say that I don’t cheat because I am scared of the punishments that come from breaking the code, but instead, the Honor Code instills a sense of pride in my work and my abilities. After my experiences on the Honor Court, I have come to appreciate my honor much more than ever before.”

Understanding the importance of one’s honor is a tricky concept for many new students to grasp, says Academic Dean Debbie Phipps.

“My personal feeling is that the Honor Code itself is not that complicated. You simply tell the truth,” she says. “If you borrow something from someone, you acknowledge it. There are times when collaboration is valuable ... but you also have to know how to give credit for work that is not your own.”

That’s why the concepts behind the Honor Code are discussed frequently at the beginning of the school year.

In cases in which a violation is minor and a student is new, a letter will be placed in his or her file and sent home to parents; the student may be put on academic warning with regard to the Honor Code. But in more serious cases, the student is referred to the Honor Court, which is made up of three faculty members and three monitors.

For students unfortunate enough to end up in front of the Honor Court for violating the Honor Code, that phrase, "I pledge my honor," hits home like an arrow to the soul.



THE COURT

"Serving on the Honor Court is a tricky situation," says Michael. "The kids that [violate] the Honor Code are never bad kids, just ones that made a mistake. It is tough to punish a fellow student or classmate, but you know it has to be done to keep the Honor Code strong and serious. After seeing a few cases on the Honor Court, I have realized that although the kids are distraught at the time, a month or so later they realize that the whole ordeal has taught them a lot about honor. So it's a tough job but one that is essential to the strength of the community."

"The Honor Court is a big deal," Phipps says. "It fol-



lows the model of a judicial hearing. I present the case, the Honor Court asks questions of the student, and he or she has to answer honestly.

"For many students, their first instinct is to balk," Phipps says. "It's hard. It's a painful, difficult time. We want them to get to the point where they can own their actions and say 'I did this.' Once they can do that, they can move forward. Getting to that point can take time, and advisers may become involved in the process."

"If you lie to the court when it's meeting," explains Dick Cobb, "you'll likely get dismissed. Horace Taft said it well: 'Truthfulness or honor is the foundation. Whatever else students are, if they tell the truth there is hope—there is something to work with.'"

After hearing all sides, the Honor Court has four options: Do nothing, issue a warning, recommend a two-week suspension, or recommend dismissal. The court reports its recommendation to the headmaster, who makes the final decision.

SITTING IN JUDGMENT

By Laura
McLaughlin '06

A school monitor describes what it's like to decide the fate of one's peers.

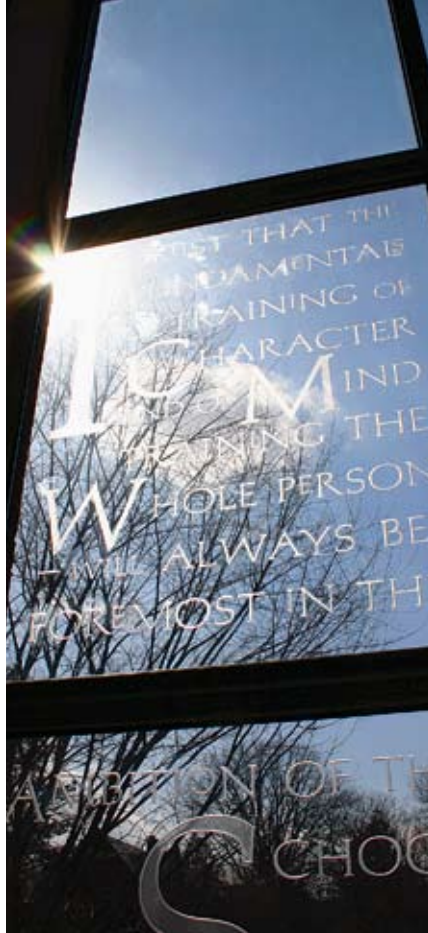


I've never spoken to her but recognize her face in the hall and know the name that pairs with it. I don't know what makes her happy, but in this room I can spot one lone tear roll down her cheek and then, after a futile attempt at self-constraint, a stream of them.

As a member of the honor court, I, in conjunction with several teachers and two fellow senior monitors, will determine the fate of this young girl I barely

know. I will decide if her crime is worthy of dismissal, potentially altering forever her entire vision of the progression of her life. With paper and pen in front of me, a knot growing in my stomach, I was going to be certain I knew all the facts.

A deep breath and she begins to speak, her voice quavering with every syllable her vocal chords manage to sound. Even before arriving at the word "sorry," she dissolves again into a fountain of tears, a frightened little girl. She already pulls at my heart. As I turn from her face to look at the paper in front of me, I feel tears beginning to well up in my own eyes.



“The reasoning on the penalty was we should fish or cut bait,” Cobb says. “Anything longer than two weeks would be the kiss of death academically. Two weeks sends a clear message to all parties that it was more significant than having a couple of beers or a fire-code violation.” Most first drug/alcohol violations receive a one-week suspension.

Most students who come before the Honor Court are punished with a two-week suspension, Cobb noted. And as difficult as that period can be, seniors who have already been accepted to college and violate the Honor Code are also required to inform their college of the violation.

“That’s especially hard to do,” Phipps says. “It’s a lot to expect of kids, especially when so much is on the line, but it reflects the seriousness with which we view the Honor Code.”

And that’s exactly the point. Blum believes that decisions made in high school are critical to forming one’s sense of self. “Adolescents making the difficult transition from child-

hood to young adulthood stand to benefit from the structure and framework that an honor code and set of fundamental rules can provide,” he says. “How do we help young people prepare to live in societies that are bound by laws, [societies] that depend on an appreciation of the law to function effectively? The honor system pledge is the lesson, the mantra, the daily reminder that an individual’s intellectual development really is best served by the use of one’s own faculties and intelligence—not by copying material and claiming it as one’s own.”

“The majority of kids here feel the Honor Code *is* important,” Laura adds, “and there is a very low tolerance among students for lying. Kids worry about [their honor] when papers or projects are assigned. They ask a lot of questions. They want to get it right; they want to do the right thing.” 🙏

Bonnie Blackburn Penhollow ’84 is a freelance writer living in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Faced with a test, a paper, and a science lab due the next day, she didn’t know what to do; there was no way she could get it all done. She never intended to copy the text verbatim. Consumed by the length of her to-do list, she failed to contemplate the gravity of the consequences.

Jotting notes as the girl speaks, I can see myself in her position. I can feel the weight that creeps into your chest when you have multiple assessments the next day. I also understand the severity of her actions. Failing to punish her would undermine the very system that makes Taft so conducive to learning and growing, the same system

that attracted me to apply four years ago.

It is also my job to represent her as a student, to make the teachers understand the breaking point from which her actions stemmed. I note the punishment the girl inflicts on herself and that it was her first offense; she does not deserve to be dismissed. Returning to school to complete her studies, she will remember the strong moral character she possesses and has gained during this journey that addressed her desperate act of wrongdoing.

“I pledge my honor....” Whether it’s on a lab, a test, or an in-class essay, the presence of those words at the very top of

the paper creates a community more often seen in years past than in the modern world—a place where an individual’s word is his or her bond. Those words allow for an environment where doors and lockers can be left unlocked, where a teacher can leave the room during a test with the assurance that the work each student hands in will be solely his or her own. The violation of those words only erodes the foundation of our school. 🙏

Laura McLaughlin ’06 is a school monitor and a member of the Honor Court. She lives in Oakville, Connecticut.

“I pledge my honor....”

