HONOR CODE: A SCREEN DOOR ON A SUBMARINE

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(1) In a university setting, students must be able to work and to study without constantly being scrutinized and hovered over by proctors and administrators. But creating a productive atmosphere where cheating, plagiarism, fraud and the like do not exist is a difficult, if not impossible, task. One solution to this dilemma is to impose an honor code system. Valparaiso University has chosen this solution to eliminate the problems of cheating and undue stress on the students. The effect this Honor Code has on students is vital to its overall success. Unfortunately, after speaking to some students, I have found the Honor Code does not carry all the weight it was intended to carry.

(2) First of all, some of the students interviewed said they had cheated or might cheat if the situation arose. The people who had cheated did not feel they were responsible for upholding the Honor Code at all and thought it was a meaningless statement. Those who might consider cheating said the Honor Code would have no effect on their decision. Whether they cheated or not, they did not feel the Honor Code was binding. None of these people felt any differently about their views when I reminded them that they had signed this Honor Code. Signature or not, the Honor Code was void of any significance, and it would not influence their lives.

(3) The rest of the students I spoke with said they would not cheat. However, I was surprised to hear that they, too, did not feel obligated to uphold the Honor Code, despite the fact that they would not cheat. Even affixing their signature was not enough to persuade them to put any measure of value into it. They would not cheat because they do not cheat. Only one person said he would uphold the Honor Code simply because he had signed it. He felt that in so doing he was standing by his name and his word, not supporting a code of "ethics."

(4) So, if the Honor Code itself has no effect on people, what is it that causes some to cheat and others to retain their integrity? One could become lost in all the "moral" implications of cheating, but what the decision seems to boil down to is how much value students place on the almighty "A." Achieving excellence, for most, is a main drive, and society dictates that high grades are the indication of success. Thus, if one believes he can be great only by receiving good grades, good grades will become one of the most important things in his life. With this in mind, he feels good grades are exceedingly important: and, if this success is jeopardized, he may cheat on an exam or plagiarize a paper to prevent his excellence from declining.
Moreover, he may even risk dishonoring his name by violating a promise to which he has set his own signature. In simpler terms, the value each individual student places on grades, not the value of the Honor Code, will determine whether he will or will not cheat.

(5) The need to halt fraudulence in the college environment is cardinal. However, if only the symptoms of a disease are treated, the sickness will continue to flourish. Cheating and plagiarism are only symptoms of the "ill-logic" that grades are of supreme importance to gaining success in life. The effect of using the Honor Code to reduce and/or destroy cheating is nil. The ambition to achieve good grades is honorable, but the lust for good grades at any cost is disgraceful.