

A History of the Davidson College Honor System
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The roots of an honor bound community began with Davidson College's conception in 1837. The Honor System at Davidson slowly made the transition from the hands of the faculty into the hands of the students. This gradual shift towards the creation of a student-run Honor System is colored with both humorous and serious stories that show how Davidson arrived at its present structure.

The necessity for disciplining students arose soon after Davidson College's foundation. In the early 1840's, some students decided to take President Williamson's carriage soon after its arrival on campus. After pulling it about two miles from campus, and intending to dispose of it there, the president "rose from its depths, and remarked that he had enjoyed the trip and would now enjoy being pulled home again." In November 1845, when the student body consisted of only sixty-eight students, the faculty suspended thirteen young men simultaneously. The 1845-46 catalogue documents a faculty member's responsibility thus: "to watch over the morals of the students." A few years later, during the early 1850's, the challenge presented itself quickly of how three faculty members could manage over fifty young men while maintaining a moral environment. The trustees outlawed a plethora of activities that students could not do within two miles of the college; for example, one could not play pool or take part in a dramatic recitation. During this time, the faculty played a strong role in disciplining the students. Their approach to disciplining the students ranged from a simple reprimand to suspension or expulsion. As the mid 1850's approached, the faculty was spending an exorbitant amount of time hearing cases of discipline; some parents perceived that the college was

losing control of the students, and such concerns resulted in a significant personnel change at Davidson.

The two literary societies at Davidson – the Philanthropic and Eumenean Societies – played a role, though informal at first, in enforcing a sort of “moral code” at Davidson. The students, not the faculty, implemented this code. Each society created a system which tried anyone who violated their particular moral code. Mary Beaty writes, “A slowly developing sense of student honor can be detected in some of the society actions, a feeling of responsibility not only for oneself but for others, so that the corporate honor of the society might be safeguarded.”

Some semblance of the modern Honor System at Davidson took shape before the Civil War. During this time, all new students signed a pledge to follow the college rules, most of which regarded social activity. William Dickey, a young professor at Davidson, wrote these words about his students in 1860: “I put their conduct in the lecture room on their honor when I began and I do not believe they have in a single instance violated it. In light of the confidence represented by Dickey in 1860’s, the faculty continued to regulate strictly the social behavior of the students. In particular, some professors visited students’ rooms weekly in order to report their conduct. In 1868, however, the faculty granted a committee of students the right to police the main college building. During this time, however, there was no veneer of an Honor Court, seeing as a student was even denied the right to defend himself to the faculty. In 1871, the faculty understandably expelled a student who, in a drunken stupor, attacked a Professor Blake with a gun. Professors continued to spend a significant amount of time making decisions about student conduct, with some verdicts requiring students to retake an exam or repeat an

entire academic year. Reactions to the school's disciplinary procedure sometimes proved to be rather extreme: upon getting word that he had failed several courses, one student broke down the fences at several professors' homes and then struck the communion table with an axe during Chapel.

Students were disciplined in the 1890's for things such as riding horses through the College Hall and singing in falsetto during Chapel services. Though the exact disciplinary procedure is not documented clearly, President Shearer wrote in June 1892 that "the only cases requiring discipline were disposed of by the judicious action of fellow students, without the necessity of faculty action." This movement towards student hegemony over disciplining other students began in the 1880's. For instance, the Eumenean Society expelled one of its members (from the college, not just their society) whom they had found guilty of plagiarism. Additionally, showing the increased trust given to students, the June 1897 edition of *Davidson College Magazine* includes a picture of an unproctored examination room, citing the vigilance of "an invisible Presence, the Honor of the Class."

A further view of the perception of honor at Davidson is seen in President Henry Louis Smith's comments in October 1904: "Davidson frankly avows her belief that *Character* is more important than Education, that Sincerity, Honor, and Purity are more valuable than knowledge." The student body gradually gained control of the Honor System and in 1910 formed a Student Council of fifteen elected representatives to whom all students were honor bound to report violations of "honor or other practices." The College gained accolades for its Honor System, which the *Toronto Globe* praised in

1912: “Davidson College, for young men, has a truly enviable reputation all over the South. A fine sense of honor is said to be characteristic of its students.”

With the drafting of an Honor Code, the Honor System was established in 1924 as we now recognize it. The Honor Code prohibited cheating, lying under oath, stealing, and failing to report the aforementioned violations; the Student Council held authority over most matters of discipline until 1958, when they founded the Honor Court (now known as the Honor Council). This group distinguished itself from the Student Council in that it could focus more effectively on the education of other students about the Honor System and the investigation of violations of the Code. The Honor Court, unlike the Student Council which had broader responsibilities within the school, focused on educating the student body about the Honor System, investigating violations, and holding hearings for possible infringements of the Honor Code.

In October 1968 the trustees approved a new document, the Code of Responsibility, whose origin can be traced to a debate about the role of external regulations upon student behavior. Dr. Spencer, President of Davidson at the time, wrote that the document was founded on “a new philosophy emphasizing individual responsibility and a partnership between faculty, administration and students.” The Code of Responsibility stressed student accountability amidst freedom, and provided a foundation for the implementation of self-scheduled exams in 1970-1971.

The firmly established Honor System at Davidson provides an environment of trust inside and outside of the classroom. Prior to admission, every student agrees to abide by the Honor Code and Code of Responsibility. Thus, all students understand Davidson College’s expectation of individual responsibility, which results in a

community of honesty and integrity. The Honor Council and Judicial Committee handle cases of Honor violations and take breaches of either Code very seriously. Both groups evaluate every case individually, and determine sanctions by considering the weight of the violation and its potential effects on both the Davidson Community and the accused individual. Above all, the Honor System exists in order to foster an environment where the College's purpose can be best realized: "to assist students in developing humane instincts and disciplined and creative minds for lives of leadership and service."

Main Sources: *A History of Davidson College*, by Mary Beaty / *The Honor System at Davidson* (1967), a pamphlet by Ed Armfield