A general note to the new members of the community: Honor Council abstracts follow within a month of every Honor Council inquiry. Names, sex, and identity have been changed, but the nature of the situation remains the same.

HONOR COUNCIL ABSTRACT

Summary: Debbie approached Honor Council with an alleged violation of the academic Honor Code. She felt that there was a question of academic dishonesty regarding her conduct on some homework assignments she had done for a course in an upper level Spanish class. The jury determined that a violation had occurred on the two homeworks in which there was verbatim copying of another person's answers. The jury also determined that there was no violation of the Honor Code regarding the instances in which Debbie had looked at another person's answers yet had completed the exercises independently without further consulting the other person's work. Please read over the final resolution before reading the abstract to get a sense of the trial's direction.

I. FACT-FINDING

Confronting/Confronted Party: Debbie told the jury that after reading the abstract from the trial involving "Oliver" she realized that in her Spanish course she copied someone else's homework. She could not "remember more than two instances where she copied a couple of exercises down."

Also, Debbie said that a fair number of times she used someone else's homework to check that hers was correct, or to see how the homework was done.

Questions: Upon asking Debbie some questions, the jury learned the following:
1. the professor gave no specific instructions regarding how much help is allowed among students, nor did any student ask about the specific instructions;
2. in two homework assignments, some answers were copied verbatim from another student's work. In one of the assignments, most of what Debbie submitted had been copied, while in the other only the last problem set had been copied;
3. homework assignments constitute roughly ten percent of the course grade.

The jury came to consensus that there was a violation of the Honor Code regarding Debbie's verbatim copying of another student's work.

However, regarding the second case, the jury was incapable of reaching a decision for the remainder of the session. Many jurors felt that a violation could not be determined since the professor's specific instructions on working together were unclear, and also since people were not sure as to how much Debbie gained from looking at another student's homework. Nevertheless, a couple of jurors felt that a violation did not occur since Debbie's looking at another person's homework before answering the exercises independently was what they perceived to be "justifiable collaboration."

After further questioning Debbie, the following points were clarified:
1. looking at the other student's answers did in fact help Debbie complete her own answers;
2. Debbie copied verbatim on two assignments;
3. Debbie looked at another person's answers and then completed the answers without further consulting the other person's homework on about five occasions. The person from whom she borrowed the completed exercises knew that Debbie was using them in this way;
4. when asked if she had been memorizing the answers which she saw or if she had simply looked at them to get an idea of the answer and then completed the answer having learned the method, Debbie replied that the work "was such that I couldn't reproduce" the answers if she hadn't known how to do it;
5. a group of about three or four people in the course had worked together on homework and thought that that was an acceptable form of collaboration.

In light of Debbie's responses, the jury felt that her conduct kept within the "spirit of
memorized the procedures to copy them. Furthermore, since Debbie had only looked at the other homework once, and then did the exercises herself as best as she could without further consulting the other homework, the jury felt that she had no intention of cheating in this case. Nevertheless, some jurors wanted to stress the importance of seeking the professor’s specific instructions in nebulous cases.

In light of the above discussion, the jury came to consensus that no violation of the Honor Code occurred regarding the way in which Debbie extrapolated the answer based on the completed homework exercises that she saw.

II. CIRCUMSTANTIAL

After the factual portion of the inquiry was over, Debbie told the jury that “there were a lot of times in class when I didn’t know what was going on.” She had talked with the professor, but it didn’t help “a whole lot.” Debbie further stated that it “wasn’t the best taught course ever given here.” She described the course’s textbook as “a real hardcore upper-level language book.” It was all of these things which led her to look at someone else’s homework.

A juror asked Debbie if she saw something wrong with verbatim copying at the time she did so, to which she replied that hers was a “case of desperation” and so she did not give it much thought at the time. She was more concerned with what the professor would think of her handing in a grossly incomplete assignment than with her grade. Debbie again noted that the homework did not represent a significant portion of the final grade in the course. Nevertheless, Debbie stated that “at some level I knew it was not ‘Kosher’.”

A juror asked whether the person from whom he was borrowing the answers knew the way in which Debbie was using them. Debbie replied that although this person knew that Debbie was looking over the answers, the responsibility lies with the person using the homework.

When asked about the relative weight of the homework grades in the course, Debbie replied that had she left the two homeworks blank, there probably would not have been a difference in her grade.

III. RESOLUTION

Tentative: based on the suggestions that Debbie gave, the jury came to consensus on the following tentative resolution:

1. That the jury allows Debbie to decide whether she should receive partial or no credit on the two homework assignments in question. The jury spent a good deal of time discussing whether or not her work constituted a failing grade. In light of the fact that Debbie brought the matter to Honor Council, the jury felt comfortable basing the resolution on what Debbie felt was “warranted.”

2. That Debbie write a letter to be attached to the abstract of this trial. In the letter, she is asked to describe the thought process which led her to present the matter to Honor Council, and to explain what she learned about the “spirit” of doing homework.

3. We recommend that Debbie participate in the upcoming Honor Code retreat. Debbie had suggested that she speak at freshman orientation, but due to confidentiality, this was not possible. The option of the retreat was chosen instead, with the proposal that her letter might be presented to freshmen during Customs Week.

When presented with the tentative resolution, Debbie felt that no credit for the two assignments would be better for two reasons: 1. “I would look at it as an assignment,” and therefore it would be “appropriate to receive no credit if there is dishonesty on one part of it.” 2. Since she suspected that there were other cases of verbatim copying which she could not recall, she felt that receiving no credit on these two assignments “would compensate for those
Final: in light of Debbie's response to the tentative resolution, the jury came to consensus on the final resolution identical to the tentative except that Debbie should receive a failing grade on the two assignments.
LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY

I turned myself in to the Honor Council because I realized that I had committed a clear-cut violation of the Honor Code. The span of time separated the offense and its realization (or acknowledgement) is, I think quite significant in my case. I don't think that I could have a) consciously committed that offense now or b) realized and admitted to myself what I had done then.

My offense stemmed from a weakness in a bad situation. For the first time in my life, I was almost failing a course (which I needed for my major), and the rest of my life was in similarly bad shape. I copied the homework answers because I didn't want the professor to know the I had no idea how to do the work. I didn't really consider how it would improve my grade, since the homeworks did not count for much. When I copied the answers, I repressed almost totally the idea that I was violating the Honor Code. Part of what allowed me to do what I did was the knowledge that people at this school do not restrict their behavior on homeworks as rigorously as they do on exams. In courses where the professor does not give specific instructions as to how to do the homework, it is up to the student to decide what is permissible.

I knew that what I was doing, copying problems outright without understanding them, was definitely not proper procedure, but the question of the Honor Code didn't enter my mind. My (somewhat neurotic) need to keep the professor in the dark as to how poorly I was doing in the course was of such concern to me that I ignored how I should be behaving under the Code.

I don't know whether I would have turned myself in last year if I had actually admitted to myself that I had committed an infraction of the Code. I did a very good job of repressing what had happened. However, I think that, even if I had fully addressed what I had done at the time, I would have been hesitant about bringing the matter before Honor Council because I didn't have much feeling for, or trust in, the Honor Code.

By the time I remembered these incidents, my attitude toward the Code had changed considerably. Instead of a set of negative rules that must be followed, I now see it more as a way to approach one's participation in this community. The imperative for me now is more one of awareness rather than one of compliance to a set of academic and social rules. What I did was to suppress any thought about the implications of what I was doing in the interest of appearing to be doing better in the course than I was doing.

When I remembered what I had done, I felt alienated from the community, especially since I had had more of a chance to see people apply the Code to their lives, even when it was quite difficult for them personally. By turning myself in, I had the opportunity to re-integrate myself into the community. This is the value of our system of self-regulation. Instead of being castigated for something that I have realized was a mistake, I can not only be a member in good standing again, but feel that I have made a small contribution to the strength of the whole process.