

Summary of the Honor System Review Committee's Recommendations

to the Committee on Examinations and Standing regarding the December 2017 referenda on the Honor Constitution

March 23, 2018

NB: These recommendations will be discussed and reviewed at the Committee on Examinations and Standing's meeting on April 11th. The Honor System Review Committee's full report will also go to the Committee on Examinations and Standing. That committee will decide which recommendations from the preliminary and the full report should be forwarded to the full faculty for a vote.

In December, the student body voted on and passed four referenda to amend the Honor Constitution. As explained in a [letter](#) sent to students on January 4 by Vice President Calhoun, Dean Dolan, and Dean Kulkarni, three of these four referenda would “fundamentally alter the University’s disciplinary penalties and standards for assessing violations of the Honor Code during in-class examinations” and could not be adopted without “the engagement and support of the faculty.” These three referenda were remanded to the Committee on Examinations and Standing. Our committee, the Honor System Review Committee (HSRC), was asked to “consider these referenda ... and to recommend to the Committee on Examinations and Standing whether the proposals about penalties, evidence, and faculty involvement in deciding infractions should be adopted.” This report summarizes the HSRC’s preliminary recommendations on the three referenda. A full report that addresses all aspects of the HSRC’s [charge](#) will be released at the end of the spring semester.

Referendum 1: Penalties

This referendum reduces the “standard penalties” for violations of the Honor Code. At present, the Honor Constitution states that a first offense normally results in a one-year suspension, and a second offense results in expulsion. For an “overtime” violation, in which a student writes past the time limit on an examination, the penalty is disciplinary probation, and a recommendation that the student receive a zero for the examination. Referendum 1 would change these penalties: the standard penalty for all first offenses, including “overtime” violations, would be disciplinary probation; a second violation would result in a one-year suspension, and a third violation would result in expulsion. Referendum 1 thus removes the distinction between “overtime” violations and more serious violations of the Honor Code.

At Princeton, the Honor Committee handles in-class examinations, while all other academic integrity violations (e.g., take-home examinations, papers) are handled by the Committee on Discipline. The proposed referendum would introduce a large disparity between the penalties imposed by the two committees.

Recommendation:

The HSRC does not recommend the adoption of this referendum because of the disparity it creates between the Honor Committee and the Committee on Discipline. The HSRC will continue to discuss penalties and will make recommendations about penalties in our full report later this semester.

Referendum 2: Evidence

This referendum would add the following text to the Honor Constitution:

A case brought to hearing must have at least two separate pieces of evidence, each of which indicates that a violation occurred.

This referendum is aligned with the current practice of the Honor Committee: in order to send a case to hearing, there must be independent support for the initial report of a violation. The purpose of the proposed constitutional amendment is to ensure that the standards of evidence could not be changed at a future date.

Recommendation:

The HSRC does not recommend the adoption of the original amendment. We can imagine cases in which there is only one piece of evidence but it so compelling that the case should move forward to a hearing. But our committee members do agree that a case should not move forward to a hearing based on a single student's testimony.

We recommend the adoption of the following revised amendment:

A case will not move forward to hearing on the basis of testimony from one witness in the absence of additional evidence substantiating the alleged violation.

Referendum 3: Faculty involvement in deciding infractions

This referendum would add the following text to the Honor Constitution:

A student will be found not responsible if the Committee fails to find overwhelmingly convincing evidence that the student ought reasonably to have understood that their actions were in violation of the Honor Code, or if the course instructor explicitly states that the a [sic] student's actions were not in violation of their class policy.

The standard of evidence in the Honor Constitution is already “overwhelmingly convincing evidence,” as written in Article II, Section D, so the important part of this amendment is the second clause, “or if the course instructor explicitly states...”

According to the drafters of this amendment, the intent of this clause is to address how the Honor Committee adjudicates “overtime” violations. There are no universal regulations across the University for how instructors should time examinations or communicate when time is up. Because of this, there is variability in the strictness with which instructors enforce the time limit on examinations. While the Honor Committee does take into consideration information about a professor's time call, this amendment is meant to offer further protection to a student who continued to work after an instructor called for the end of the exam. Referendum 3 thus addresses an important concern about ambiguous course policies, a significant example of which is how exam end time is called.

The proposed amendment amounts to a “professor veto.” This has a number of drawbacks. One of the reasons that disciplinary violations are handled centrally (by the Honor Committee and the Committee on Discipline) is so that there will be consistent standards by which academic integrity violations are decided and penalized. Implementing a “professor veto” harms this consistency. A “professor veto” also opens the door for students or colleagues to place pressure on an instructor to offer exonerating testimony to the Honor Committee.

Recommendation:

The HSRC does not recommend adoption of this referendum because it undoes the centrality of the academic integrity process and introduces the possibility that biased testimony from a single individual (the course instructor) could determine the outcome of an honor case.