

Guidebook

MENU



Living with the honor principle

Introduction

Living with the honor principle is one of the challenging aspects of studying at Reed. But what is the honor principle? It has no official definition; you won't find it in the community constitution or tucked away in some obscure governance document. Nevertheless, all members of the community are bound by the honor principle.

The most common formulation of the honor principle states that any action that causes unnecessary pain or discomfort to any member of the Reed community, group within the community, or to the community as a whole is a violation of the honor principle. While most people would agree with this formulation, this is an interpretation of the honor principle rather than a definition. The fact is that the honor principle has never been officially defined.

Instead, each member of the Reed community must work to develop an understanding of it, both as an individual and as a community member. You should keep this in mind as you read and think about the honor principle.

This guidebook explores how the honor principle can be both useful and used, despite the fact that it is not explicitly defined. We hope to help you think about what the honor principle is and how it works. The honor principle is not an easy way to run community affairs: it would be much easier to impose endless rules and regulations, the route chosen by many other colleges and universities.

Reed, however, remains committed to the notion that the expectation of honorable conduct is the best way to run its internal affairs. Each individual must recognize and accept the extraordinary responsibility placed on him or her by the honor principle in order for the community to function effectively for everyone.

Old Reed characterizations

In 1919 the constitution of the student body asserted that student conduct should be governed "by the application of the honor principle, which is based on the assumption that students will be guided . . . by their own knowledge of right and wrong."

In 1963 the community senate approved a clarifying statement (in 1968 this statement was amended by inserting the word "unnecessary" before "embarrassment."):

"Two kinds of behavior are . . . in violation of the honor principle: (1) Conduct which causes embarrassment, discomfort or injury to other individuals or to the community as a whole. (2) Conduct in violation of specific rules that have been developed over the years to meet special conditions in the community."

In 1973 the faculty adopted a still more explicit statement:

"The members of the Reed College community believe that they should take upon themselves a responsibility for maintaining standards of conduct which ensure an atmosphere of honesty and mutual trust in their academic and social lives. Such standards of conduct rest upon a principle of honor rather than a constitutional system of right and law. This principle entails the unquestioned integrity of the individual in all areas of his intellectual activity, and a shared responsibility for enabling the college as a whole to achieve its highest aims as a community of scholarship and learning. The honor principle also demands the respectful concern of each person for the other, and the exercise of conscionable judgment in all actions toward individuals and their property. Let it be understood that such integrity, concern, and judgment are not

simply matters of an individual's intentions, but, rather, entail qualities of conduct which are clearly reflected in one's actions. Although the college does not call upon its members to sign a pledge of honor, it does recognize the necessity for tacit agreement by all its members to support the honor principle by governing their own conduct in accordance with its spirit, by respecting regulations which the community has established, by acting in a responsible manner toward honor violations that come to their attention. Members of the community should recognize their obligations to notify the judicial board of actions involving a breach of the honor principle, even though such actions may be their own."

The current characterization of the honor principle follows in the footsteps of these earlier attempts to establish contemporary "working" community guidelines, though by no means does it define the honor principle itself.

Avoiding problems

The simplest way to resolve an honor issue is to engage in discussion before the issue even develops. Consider the effect of your actions on others. In most instances, we don't act to put others in uncomfortable situations, but that can still be an unanticipated outcome. Most friction can be avoided by relatively small concessions to others' feelings.

Where your behavior will only affect a small group of people (for example, the people in your dorm) try to identify those who could be inconvenienced or offended by your actions and talk to them. If you want to play loud music, try to reach a compromise first, rather than waiting to see if a confrontation will result from playing it when you feel like it.

If your actions might have an effect on the larger community, try to behave discreetly. Everyone bends some rules. The important thing is to bend them in such a way that you affect as few people as possible. Consider whether or not your behavior could possibly cause anyone discomfiture you might not feel. Be mindful of every member of the community, not just yourself and your friends.

Recognize that the honor principle assumes that all members of the community are in control of their behavior and willing to take responsibility for their actions. If you appear to be drunk or rowdy, someone else might not feel that you would respond

appropriately when confronted. Remember that you're still obliged to be respectful of other people's rights at all times and in all mental states.

Final thoughts

"The honor principle urges us all to reflect carefully on our words and deeds rather than flinging them in a haphazard and potentially damaging way. At this juncture we are faced by two possibilities. The community as a whole can act to pressure guilty parties into ending their destruction, or we can remain coolly impassive and force the administration to lumber forth and clean up our mess. Social responsibility is the necessary companion of social freedom; it's time for the student body to demonstrate that the college's faith in the honor principle has not been misplaced."

--Derek Lyons '00 and Sylvia Thompson '00, printed in a spring 1996 issue of the Quest

"Part of what makes adapting to living with the honor principle difficult as an incoming student is that it defies everything modern culture teaches us. In America, individualism is often mistaken for uninformed defiance of community. Individuals can exist within a community, and that is what Reed needs. Reed is indeed a community of scholars and individuals with academic goals. If 1,400 of the world's supposedly brightest people can't learn to live with each other maturely and respectfully, what hope can there be for the rest of the world? I challenge every student, professor, administrator, and staff member to embrace the quest for community and humanity."

-- *Patrick Stockstill '03*

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