



The whole affair began with a seemingly routine 20-question, multiple choice certification (CERT) test given to the Class of '07 in April of 2004. The test was about the usual old chestnuts—fourth class knowledge and regulations—so nobody gave it much thought. In fact, the passing score was 80 percent, and cadets were allowed to retake the test twice more without remediation.

In some squadrons, the upper-class and AOCs had placed an extra incentive on fourth classmen to complete the test early, stating that no fourth classmen could sign out on pass until everyone had completed testing. And so, nearly 1,250 doolies were administered and completed the test at their leisure via computer, and all cadets then departed happily on their weekend passes.

The Training Flight performed the usual number-crunching of means, standard deviations, individual question validation measures and reliability checks. All appeared normal.

Days later, a few cadets approached Training Flight with the minor complaint that they had been marked wrong on question #10 when they knew they had entered the correct answer. They showed the staff where they were, indeed, correct. Sure enough, a Training Flight NCO had entered the answer key to question #10 incorrectly, and so everyone's test was rescored.

SOMETHING DIDN'T COMPUTE

Things began unraveling. When the test was rescored, Training Flight discovered nearly 80 percent of the 1,250 doolies who took the test had curiously marked the "incorrect" answer on question #10. Immediately, the USAFA Math Department crunched a few numbers and passed their suspicions back to Training.

Computer-scored mass testing is a delight to data-gathering nerds, and USAFA has no shortage of them. Not only did the Training Flight

have the cadet's final score, but they also could determine additional facts, such as how much time the test-taker took and whether the test-taker was taking the test at the same time as his or her roommate.

Using this electronic paper trail, the investigators didn't have much trouble narrowing in on three cadets who admitted they had taken the test early and voluntarily written up an answer key which they then distributed to various cadets and squadrons. As with the laws of close-knit cohesive groups, the cheating had spread with the speed of the Ebola virus. It's commonly known cadets do not give training the same respect as academics. After all, these cadets reasoned, this test was only another stupid and annoying military training exercise.

THE HONOR SYSTEM IS MOBILIZED

The Training Flight, the Law Department, the Honor Division, and the cadet honor representatives all thought otherwise. Step 1, deciding who ought to be investigated required setting some ground rules. Therefore, the Training Flight initiators decided amongst themselves only to follow up on those cases where the cadet (1) received 100 percent on the original version of the test, and (2) took 3 minutes or fewer to complete the test. Based on these initial suspicions, the paper trail expanded to 266 formal squadron-level honor clarifications, a process similar to a grand jury. At this level, the cadet honor representatives recommended forwarding 69 of these honor cases up to either an honor board or sanctions panel.

The USAFA Cheating Affair of 2004

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Step 2: All honor cases recommended for forwarding are first passed through a legal review. The honor committee brought their evidence down to the Law Department where the lawyers went through a continuous case-by-case review of the 69 forwarded folders. This is the time when hard evidence overrides hunches. Although the “100 percent + <3-minute rule” was a pretty powerful investigative starting point, the lawyers cautioned that it alone was purely circumstantial and recommended dropping 33 of these cases. These cases were attached with the following boiler-plate types of phrases pasted into their legal reviews:

The [Investigative Team] has substantially complied with the requirement to collect all relevant information. There is no direct evidence that the respondent received or used unauthorized help in taking the test. There is circumstantial evidence (the test taken in 2 min, 47 sec, with a score of 100 percent before adjustment for #10, respondent's roommates present and taking the test at the same time, what the initiator believed to be a lack of extensive studying) tending to indicate that the respondent could have cheated. However, in my opinion in light of the lack of any direct evidence of an act and the roommate's and respondent's statements to the effect that there was no cheating and the respondent had had Prep School experience, there is not sufficient evidence at present to support a reasonable belief that the Honor Code has been violated. I recommend that this case not be forwarded to a Wing Honor Board at this time.

In other words, circumstantial evidence alone did not meet the Honor System standards for guilt to be established “beyond a reasonable doubt.” For those 33 cadets who may well have been as guilty as the dog caught in the refrigerator, their cases were, nevertheless, dropped.

For Step 3, the remaining 36 cases went to the Honor Division, and here their real work began. There was no repeat of the 1951 West Point honor scandal when the urgency of graduation overrode the need to complete evidence-gathering and the creation of formal honor hearings. Nor was it like the 1972 USAFA cheating incident where each cadet received a cursory 27.03 minute hearing. Because the Commandant and the Superintendent directed that all cases be resolved prior to graduation exercises, this was a tall order. The Honor Division was prepared to convene as many as 100 full boards; hence, the Honor System went into overdrive. The honor representatives worked overtime, the Honor Division called several reservists back to active duty, and USAFA contracted four courtroom recorders. For the next two weeks the Honor Division had directed as many as three honor boards running simultaneously, each board scheduling two hearings per day.

JUSTICE IS SERVED

The 2004 honor hearings were nothing less than admirably thorough. The honor boards grilled witnesses, inspected testimony, and compared computer data with testimony. For instance, when interviewing a cadet with a 1.99 GPA who suspiciously scored 100 percent and completed his test in 2 minutes and 20 seconds, the board inspected his dubious recollections with microscopic precision. Many choice comments made by accused cadets ranked in the category of “The cat ate my homework.” In a formal court, a prosecutor would have delighted in dissecting some of these incredulous comments. (Editor's note: identities of the cadets for the following quotes have been concealed to protect their identities.)

“While I committed the act of cheating, there is no way I had any intent.”

“I've always been a good multiple choice test taker, with examples like a 1400 on my SAT.”

“Since the fifth grade, I have taken standardized tests that have repeatedly shown that even at a rather young age, I was reading at beyond college level.”

“I did not think that this test counted toward anything big ...”

“I am very team focused. I know that a team is only as strong as its weakest member, and I constantly seek to strengthen my team by helping my classmates when they need it.”

“Coincidences of the statistics of the CERT test among my roommates and myself are just coincidences.”

In the end, 19 cadets were found in violation of the honor code, and most of them were offered and accepted honor probation. Unfortunately, five cadets resigned before final adjudication of their sanctions, and another nine cadets who continued to lie—mostly on their cover-ups—either resigned or were disenrolled.

... AND AN ADDITION TO THE HONOR SYSTEM

The Commandant added another program to the Honor System which still remains in effect. About 12 suspected cadets who were found not in formal violation were placed under a new program of “Honor Mentorship”—an inferred probation. It was the Commandant's way of saying, “You put yourself in a bad situation, and you need more honor training. We'll be watching you.” At the squadron level, these cadets continued to receive counseling for an additional 3 months. As there were no penalties or restrictions attached to this training, honor mentorship did not fall under the jurisprudence umbrella.

... AND A FEW CONCLUSIONS

Once more, the Honor System had been challenged, and USAFA made yet more minor adjustments to the system. For example, CERT tests have reverted to paper-and-pencil format and come in revised Forms A and B.

But the Honor System withstood its tests well, and from them we draw these robust conclusions:

(1) USAFA still takes its Honor System seriously. It has the budget, the manpower, *and* the will to continue it.

(2) Regardless of whether the legal system has placed inconveniences upon the Honor System, the Academy will not hesitate to enforce its provisions.

(3) All cadets accused of honor violations will continue to receive full measure of their entitled legal safeguards. ▣

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