



# “On My Honor...”

Cheating, particularly Internet plagiarism, is epidemic among high school and college students. Are they just playing copycat in an integrity-challenged society? Educators and students address dishonesty on campus.

by Christine Mullaney and Susan Kane

**S**o begins the University of Virginia's honor pledge, held in high esteem for the last 162 years by students attending the university Thomas Jefferson founded in 1819. Although the honor system has evolved over the years, the basic principle requiring that students shall not lie, cheat or steal has remained constant. “The honor system is indeed the university's most cherished tradition,” states the honor committee. Within this “community of trust,” the committee further notes, students may take unproctored exams in their own rooms or outside in the gardens and may even “write checks with local merchants simply by showing their student I.D.” since they are “formally bound” by the honor code within the city of Charlottesville, population 40,000, and in surrounding Albemarle County. Expulsion from the university is the single sanction for those found guilty of violating this trust.

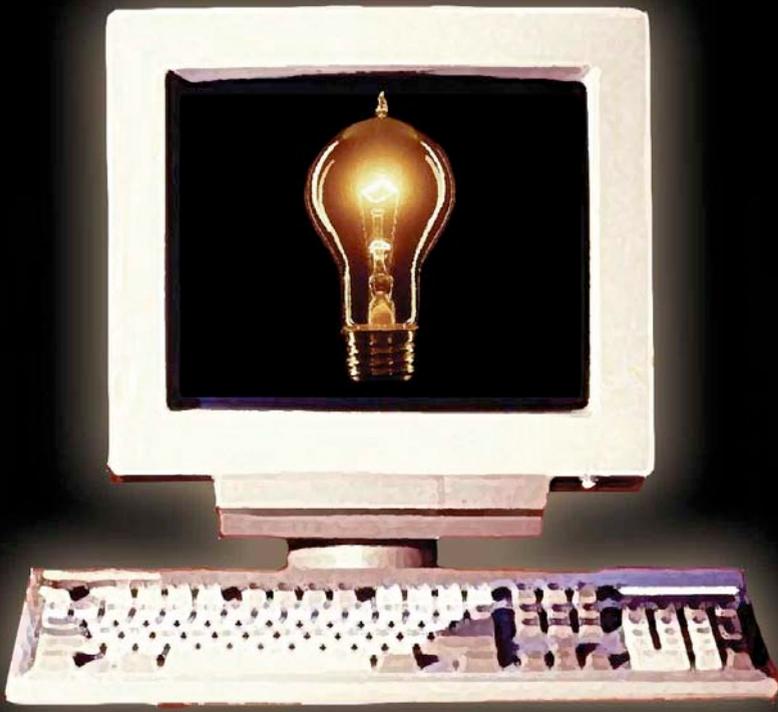
Anyone perusing the headlines in recent years might not think the University of Virginia is a real place in 21st century America. A daily barrage of negative news from virtually every sector seems to indicate a creeping dishonesty within modern culture, played out most spectacularly in the corporate and political worlds, but also evident in scandals affecting secondary and higher education. In a report aired April 29, 2004, for example, ABC-NEWS “PrimeTime Thursday” correspondent Charles Gibson discovered widespread cheating in high schools and on college cam-

pus. A poll of 12-to 17-year-olds conducted by ABC to support the television special found “about one in three [who] say they themselves have cheated, rising to 43% of older teens.”

“PrimeTime's” six-month investigation revealed cheating on college campuses across the country and “a whole new mindset” among students to justify their behavior. Take Joe, one of the students “PrimeTime” spoke with, who cheats routinely because “the real world is terrible...I'll cheat to get by,” or Mary, who explains to “PrimeTime” that students are “not really there to learn anything. You're just learning to learn the system.” In addition to this pervasive cynicism, “PrimeTime” found more mundane excuses for cheating: Other people do it so it's “almost stupid if you don't,” and the usual “you don't want to be a dork and study for eight hours a day.”

Academia has not been indifferent to the climate of dishonesty which surrounds college students. The Center for Academic Integrity (CAI), founded by Rutgers University Professor Donald L. McCabe and headquartered at Duke University since 1997, provides a forum for its more than 320 member institutions “to identify and affirm the values of academic integrity and to promote their achievement in practice,” according to its mission statement. CAI defines academic integrity “as a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.”

Acknowledging that “it can be difficult to translate



## Stealing ideas, 21<sup>st</sup> century style

*Plagiarize: To use and pass off as one's own the ideas or writings of another (American Heritage Dictionary, third edition, Houghton Mifflin Co.).*

The advent of the World Wide Web has raised cheating to a new art form. It is not only easy – there are dozens of free or fee sites offering existing or even custom-written papers – it is not considered dishonest by at least some students who practice “cut and paste” plagiarism. According to the Center for Academic Integrity, the number of students admitting to Internet plagiarism rose from 10% in 1999 to 41% in a 2001 survey, while the majority of those surveyed (68%) did not view this as a serious problem.

In addition to instructing on proper ways to cite, some educators have developed cheat-proof curriculums. Others make it clear that cyberspace plagiarism will not be tolerated, and they back it up by using services like Turnitin.com to catch cheaters. Turnitin is used by thousands of institutions, but other online detection services also exist, such as CopyCatch and Glatt.

values...into action,” the Center’s research has identified some “campus norms and practices, such as effective honor codes, [that] can make a significant difference in student behaviors, attitudes and beliefs.” The research shows that both traditional honor codes, which are student-run and support non-tolerance of cheating as well as unproctored exams, and modified honor codes, without these elements, reduce cheating. Professor McCabe affirmed these findings to *St. Joseph’s College Magazine*, with one or two exceptions where there were either system abuses or little enforcement.

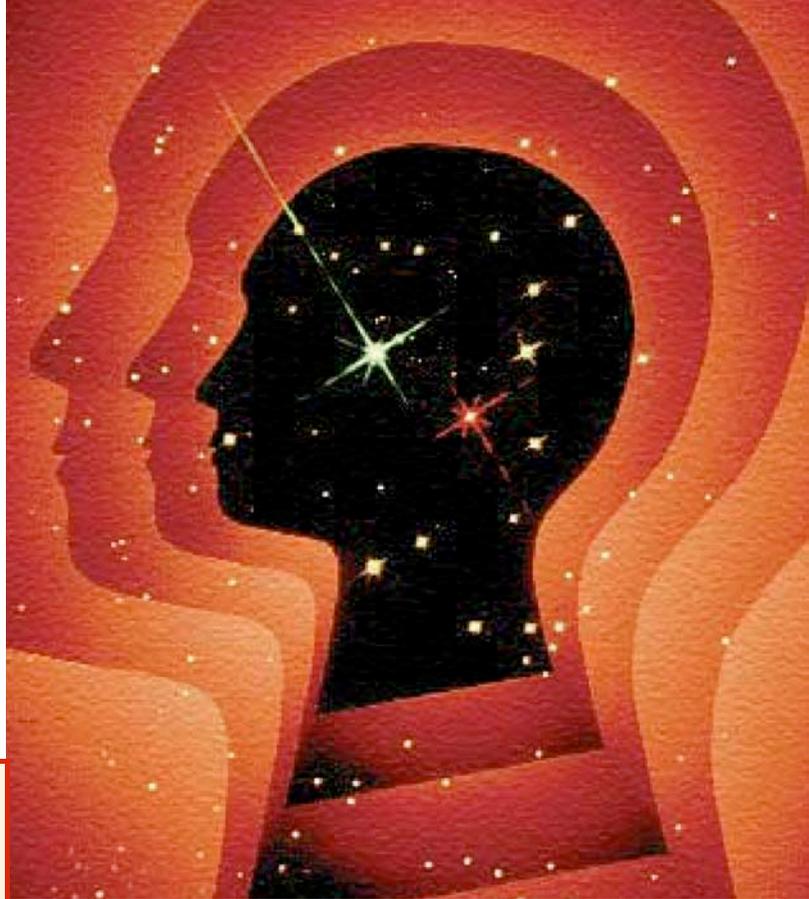
Loyola College in Maryland introduced an honor code in 1990 as a proactive response to a *Baltimore Sun* editorial that charged widespread cheating at the College, a Jesuit Catholic institution with approximately 6,000 undergraduate and graduate students. An outraged Student Government Association proposed adopting an honor code, which was quickly put to a referendum and voted in. Although it is a “full code” that mandates reporting of violations by fellow students, Assistant VP of Student Development Rick Saterlee recognizes that many students will not report cheating. “It does happen, every so often,” he said, “...so we consciously leave it in the code as an ideal more students will aspire to over time.”

Dan Ranalli '04, a three-term member of Loyola’s honor council, respects UVA’s code but explains that Loyola’s has a “Jesuit twist”: no zero tolerance policy. “I have yet to serve on a case where a student is suspended on a first charge,” he said. “For us, the educative and redemptive quality we provide to students is the most important.” Preliminary results of an academic integrity survey indicated that 93% of polled students showed a medium to very high understanding of campus policies concerning cheating, while 76% rated these policies as medium to very highly effective. On these same questions, faculty reported their understanding at 96%, but placed the effectiveness of cheating policies at only 54%.

Although experts agree that no successful honor code can be imposed on a reluctant student body, faculty cooperation is also vital. As 2004 Loyola graduate and economics major Matthew Festa put it, “My take on the honor code is fairly simple: It works when teachers enforce it, it fails when they don’t.” Faculty support at the University of Virginia is considered “crucial.” As a practical matter, Virginia faculty is encouraged to discuss honor policy throughout the semester and to participate in the “community of trust” by, as one example, giving unproctored exams. According to honor policy, “if students feel trusted, they will rise to that trust.”

William Taylor, recently retired professor of political science at Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, IL, agrees that faculty involvement is vital to any successful honor policy. He told *St. Joseph’s College*

“We,  
the members of the  
St. Joseph’s College  
community,  
commit  
ourselves to  
academic  
integrity.”



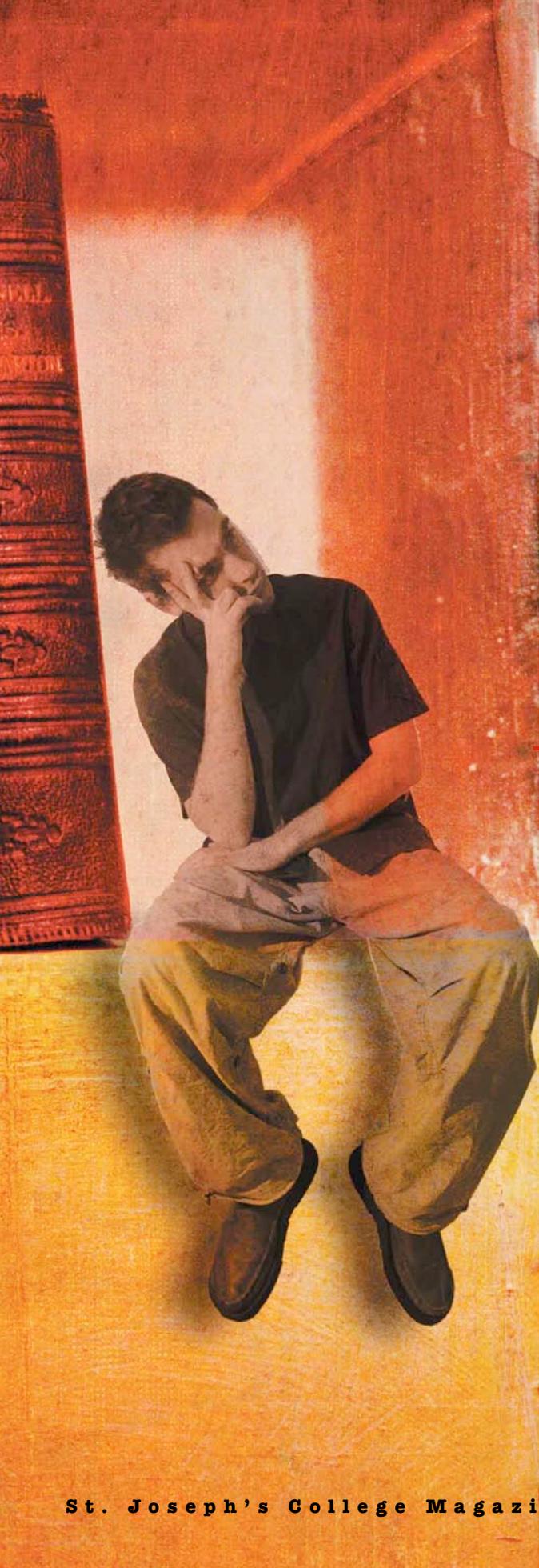
*Magazine* “students are less likely to cheat if their professor is concerned about academic integrity. They must see that these principles apply equally to students and faculty and [upholding them] is a shared responsibility.”

In “A Letter to My Students” he used to present at the beginning of each semester, Professor Taylor wrote: “Academic integrity basically requires the same things of you as a student as it requires of me as a teacher.” After fully explaining these requirements, Professor Taylor urged his students to read Oakton’s code of academic conduct because “the college is every bit as committed to academic integrity as I am.” Finally, in his letter, he addressed what is probably the toughest part of any honor code: non-tolerance. His answer: Confront the offending student, and “if worse comes to worse” tell the professor. “Academic integrity...involves a system of interconnected rights and responsibilities that reflect our mutual dependence upon one another...through daily practice integrity will come to be woven throughout the fabric of our lives, and thus through at least a part of the fabric of society,” Professor Taylor said.

St. Joseph’s College exists with that society. Although the current *Student Handbook* states that St. Joseph’s has “a long-standing tradition of considering integrity as a primary value,” and that “violations of academic integrity are treated very seriously,” the College’s traditional honor code, in place since 1921, floundered in the 1970s.

The reporting mandate was the primary sticking point for students’ not signing the pledge in the 1970s, according to Brooklyn Academic Dean S. Margaret Buckley. She and others present in the ’70s, attribute this to the era’s broad cultural changes and prevailing reluctance on the part of young people at the time to judge the behavior of their peers. In 1975, the student committee responsible for administering

We promise  
to pursue  
the highest ideals  
of academic  
life,  
to challenge  
ourselves  
with the most  
rigorous standards,



to be honest  
in any academic  
endeavor,  
to conduct ourselves  
responsibly  
and  
honorably,

the code asked that it be suspended for a trial period of one year. The administration acceded, but student government leaders campaigned vigorously for its return, leading several months later to an optional dual system of proctored and unproctored exams. Jack McGuire '76, who was student government president at the time and is today a lawyer in private practice, argued for reinstatement. For those willing to commit, he maintained in a recent interview, an honor code is "a way of checking one's own moral compass."

Controversy continued, however, culminating with a 1978 symposium that brought together faculty and students from both sides of the argument. Among those who spoke for the honor code was Philosophy Department Chair Dr. Stanley Nevins. "It is a limited perception that considers that the honor system is a way of giving tests, or even an effort to make people honest," he said. "How absurd...the honor system stands instead as a witness to this community's commitment to...those values that transcend the exigencies of survival and which make survival worthwhile." Following the symposium, the student exam committee again asked faculty to suspend the system, and this time there was no appeal. "In 1975 there was a big impetus to reinstate, but four years later it was very different, not even a flicker," S. Margaret recalled.

But the issue was never really put to rest. The topic resurfaced in 1996, again in Brooklyn. After reading an article about college cheating, S. Margaret formed an ad hoc committee to promote academic integrity, organize campus-wide discussions and develop a formal statement expressing the College's commitment to that ideal. Out of those meetings also emerged suggested guidelines for professors to follow in educating students about what does and does not constitute cheating, underscoring the faculty's critical role.

## The "Bloomfield Trials"

As recently as last spring, the topic of honor codes was discussed by Brooklyn students, faculty and staff during a program sponsored by Sound Bites, a monthly forum for informal intellectual discourse. Among other things, participants explored whether a code should be re-instituted at SJC, according to Sound Bites co-founder Dr. David Seppala-Holtzman, chair of the Mathematics Department. "The one clear statement to come out of [the discussion] was that the portion of the code that required students to police one another was not workable, at least not now," he said.

Which brings us to the question: Is a modified code, minus the reporting mandate, practical for St. Joseph's in 2004? Is a formal honor system needed if an institution already has a strong policy in place condemning cheating, along with stiff consequences?

According to CAI's Professor McCabe, a policy alone does not carry the weight of an honor code, modified or other. Colleges "assume students will look at [a policy], but with an honor code, there's more of a constant dialogue" about academic integrity, he explained. Professor McCabe thinks that a modified code may actually garner greater student support and therefore be "a smarter place to start" for a school like St. Joseph's. "Even at schools with very strong [traditional] honor codes...students just are not willing to report cheating," he stated, noting that all but one of the approximately 25 colleges and universities that adopted a code in recent years, adopted a modified code. "Change comes slower," he added, but codes are much more effective in the long run and he counseled patience: "You have to give it time, probably five years."

On the Suffolk Campus, Assistant Professor of Philosophy Wendy Turgeon, Ph.D., is spearheading a new effort to consider adopting an honor code at SJC. Calling relativism "a bankrupt theory," she asked, "How tolerant should I be? Of stealing a car? Of stripping prisoners? Of cheating? Cheat on an exam, cheat on my spouse." She argued, "The strength of an honor code is that it gives a sense of community support. I wouldn't call you a rat because you turned in a cheater. In some ways it takes the responsibility off the individual and puts it on the community. It frees the individual up to do the right thing."

Faculty polled expressed mixed reactions to the question. Although he favors an honor code, Assistant Professor of Business Ralph Nofi cautioned, "It will be easy enough to introduce the code to incoming freshmen... but getting support from upperclassmen might be more difficult." Others remembered the old system fondly, but raised doubts about its practicality today. "We now have a very different generation and type of student body," stated English Department Chair Patricia Gabel. "Many are part-time or transfers who may find it difficult to experience the kind of devotion...to an institution...which such a code really needs...In addition, faculty have a responsibility to provide their students with the 'academic safety' which proctoring should offer."

Dr. Paul Hawryluk, professor of psychology, said the values of honor and integrity are already stressed in the Student and Faculty Handbooks and "as such, an honor

At the end of the fall 2000 semester at the University of Virginia, a student complained to physics Professor Louis Bloomfield that students with higher marks than hers had cheated in his popular introductory physics course. In response, Professor Bloomfield wrote a computer program to detect word similarities and applied it to term papers turned in during the spring 2001 and previous four semesters, which covered over 1,800 papers. The result was the so-called "Bloomfield Trials," which received national press attention.

Under UVA's entirely student run honor system, an investigative panel determines whether or not to drop a case or bring it to trial. Out of 158 Bloomfield cases of suspected plagiarism, 10 students admitted guilt before the panel and left the university, and the panel referred another 59 to trial. Eighteen students admitted guilt at trial, and student juries found another six students not guilty and judged 20 students guilty. In all, the university expelled 45 students and revoked three graduates' degrees.

The current chairperson of the honor committee, fourth year student Meghan Sullivan, called the number of cases discovered by Professor Bloomfield "disappointing," but said the honor committee had "demonstrated its effectiveness" through its timely handling of the investigations and trials. Honor trials in 2003-04, a more typical year on this campus of 18,000, found eight students guilty of cheating, one student guilty of stealing and 11 students not guilty of cheating. A total of 76 cases were investigated.

Professor Bloomfield offers his software for free at The Plagiarism Resource Site:  
<http://plagiarism.phys.virginia.edu>.

code already exists” at SJC. “Honor and integrity cannot be imposed by fiat or engendered by affixing a signature to a statement of intent,” he maintained. “They must be nurtured through our public pronouncements...and exemplified in the quality of our interactions with one another.”

Violations of academic integrity are taken very seriously at St. Joseph’s, said Academic Vice President S. Loretta McGrann. The *Student Handbook* details the College’s policy and procedures regarding plagiarism and other forms of cheating. Faculty are urged to report all suspected infractions to the academic dean, and offenders face penalties ranging from an F on a paper or course to suspension or expulsion.

“We leave options because, like the Jesuits,” S. Loretta said, “we are always looking for and encouraging growth toward an ideal, while acknowledging the realities of human failings.” According to Sister, while the College does not have a formal honor code, incoming freshmen are encouraged to recite together an Academic Integrity Pledge during an Investiture ceremony held at the start of the new academic year, and professors are encouraged to include a statement on academic integrity on their course outlines.

Although not opposed to an honor system, S. Loretta “would like to know if the students are pushing for it because without their support it will not work.” She added, “The liberal arts are about the free play of the mind. It’s up to us to free the students, to give them confidence, so they don’t feel trapped into cheating. That doesn’t take away individual responsibility. We have to constantly confront the student [suspected of cheating], and we will.”

Suffolk Student Government Association president Stephanie Falco ranks the honor code a less important issue than, say, campus diversity, but believes “it’s something worth trying to get people to think about.” After meeting with Dr. Turgeon last spring, Christen Gang, a junior and the current SGA vice president in Suffolk, was “largely in support” of reinstating an honor code. As last year’s sophomore Student Senate representative, Christen presented the idea to the entire Senate, in an effort to gain support from the largest group of student leaders on campus. She was

soundly rebuffed. The majority of Senate members doubted that most SJC students would take the code seriously. In the end, Christen convinced only one student out of about 30 that an honor code was feasible. Stephanie would like to introduce the issue to the Senate again this year, since “a new Senate could equal a whole new response.”

Brooklyn students responded somewhat more favorably to the honor code idea when it was discussed at last semester’s Sound Bites meeting, according to SGA President Christine Tobin, a Brooklyn junior who favors an honor code as a “positive system [that] focuses on the good.” Pointing out that “cheating is not a victimless crime,” Christine believes that an honor code benefits serious students who don’t cheat.

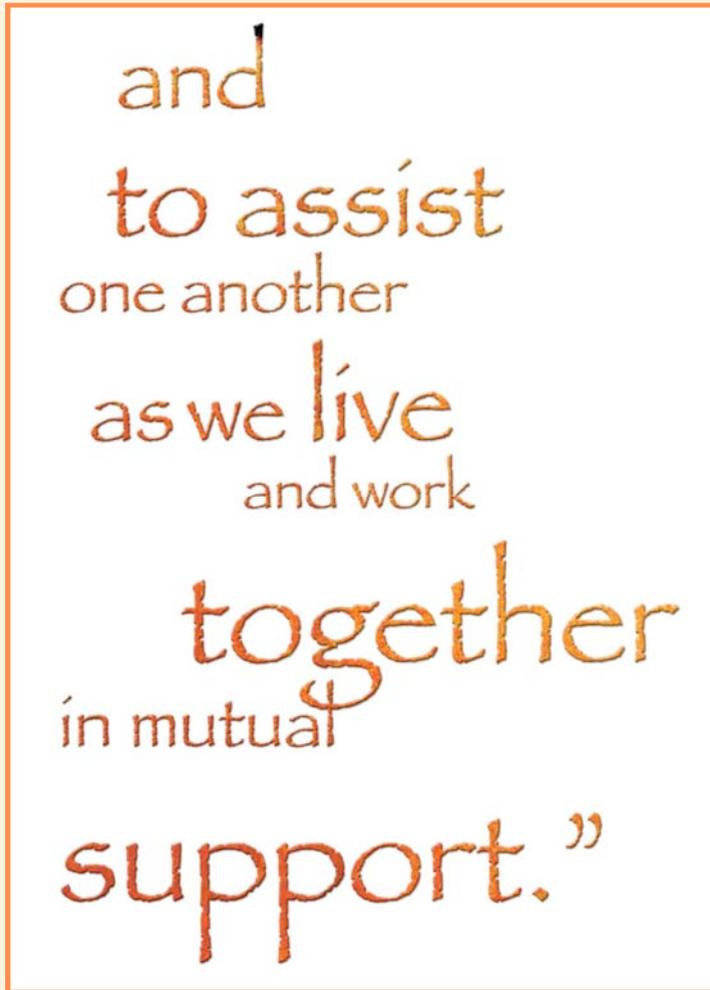
The Brooklyn SGA vice president, junior Christina Traverson, also supports an honor code but fears that a few cheaters would take advantage. Like Christine Tobin, who feels that faculty opposing an honor code “underestimates” young people, Christina worries, “As much as faculty wants to trust us, I don’t know how much they do.” Brooklyn senior representative Janine Farraj said that “faculty is always talking about academic integrity, so an honor code is a good addition.” She believes a code “would be

taken seriously by serious students [who are] offended by students who cheat.”

At the very least most would agree it’s a topic that merits further discussion. It’s always important to talk about the issue of academic integrity, to keep discussion alive and “see what comes from it,” said S. Margaret Buckley.

To this end, Dr. Turgeon hopes to organize a day at the Suffolk Campus this year to encourage discussion similar to those that have occurred in Brooklyn through the years. “It may take a while to figure out what our statement is,” she said. “The larger society teaches you to look out for yours and no one else. That is directly counter to those values we hang on our banners [at SJC]. An honor code could be a concrete expression that we have these values already.” ■

*Meaghan Ginnetty contributed to this story.*



*The SJC Academic Pledge freshmen recite together at Investiture.*