



## **AIS Newsletter: Issue 2018-Q3**

# **A Contemporary Perspective On Truth-Seeking And Honor Code Traditions**

*These remarks were given by Gary Pavela to a faculty convocation at Agnes Scott College on August 22, 2018. The occasion was designed to highlight the history and importance of the Agnes Scott Honor Code. It also provided an opportunity to praise the work of outgoing Agnes Scott President Elizabeth Kiss, who previously directed the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University and now serves as Warden of Rhodes House at Oxford University and CEO of the Rhodes Trust.*

**Key quotation** (from remarks below): “I think we’re in the midst of an iconic “battle of ideas.” How this battle is resolved--always tentatively resolved--will define the future of our country. College teachers, administrators, and students are literally in the front lines, especially as we affirm the commitment to truth-seeking associated with honor code traditions.”

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## A contemporary perspective on truth-seeking and honor code traditions



### “Truth prevails” (an opening comment)

Yesterday I saw an encouraging *Washington Post* headline (related to the conviction of Paul Manafort) titled “Truth Prevails.” It’s consistent with my theme today: The importance of affirming and expanding the commitment to truth-seeking associated with Honor Code traditions.

## An implicit definition of truth is built into the Constitution

Perhaps, like me, you’re disappointed with aspects of our government right now. It’s important to remember, however, that certain design features in the Constitution typically work well. My short list includes the separation of powers and enumerated Constitutional rights, like freedom of expression and trial by jury.

If you sought to redesign our Constitution, would your replacement contain something like [Article V](#) (a procedure for amendment)?

If so, you and the original authors of the Constitution share an important perspective on truth: namely, our conceptions of truth evolve over time. Those conceptions may be actionable or even foundational, but never unassailable. This insight may be the most radical provision in our founding document.

There’s a cultural ethos operating here, [summarized in 1944](#) by Judge Learned Hand. “The spirit of liberty,” he said, “is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right.”

Imagine if our current political leaders exhibited more of that perspective.

## President Obama on the foundation of truth-seeking in politics

As suggested at the outset, I’d like to emphasize the importance of affirming and expanding the commitment to truth-seeking associated with Honor Code traditions. My perspective is prompted, in part, by re-reading of President Obama’s [Farewell Address](#). He said:

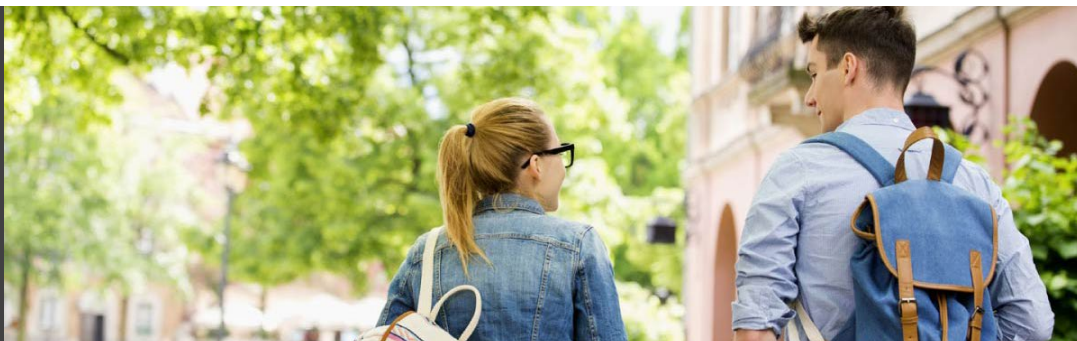
Politics is a battle of ideas; in the course of a healthy debate, we’ll prioritize different goals, and the different means of reaching them. But without some common baseline of facts; without a willingness to admit new information, and concede that your opponent is making a fair point, and that science and reason matter, we’ll keep talking past each other, making common ground and compromise impossible.

I think we’re in the midst of an iconic “battle of ideas.” How this battle is resolved--always tentatively resolved--will define the future of our country. College teachers, administrators, and students are literally in the front lines, especially as we affirm the commitment to truth-seeking associated with honor code traditions.

## Two historical perspectives on truth: Jerusalem and Rome

Debates about the definition of truth include a Biblical account of an encounter between Jesus and the Roman governor Pilate:

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Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice.

Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all. (*John 18:37-38*).

The religious perspective of truth expressed by Jesus was grounded in revelation. His truth was clear, definitive, final, and knowable, albeit not necessarily through the empirical methodologies of science.

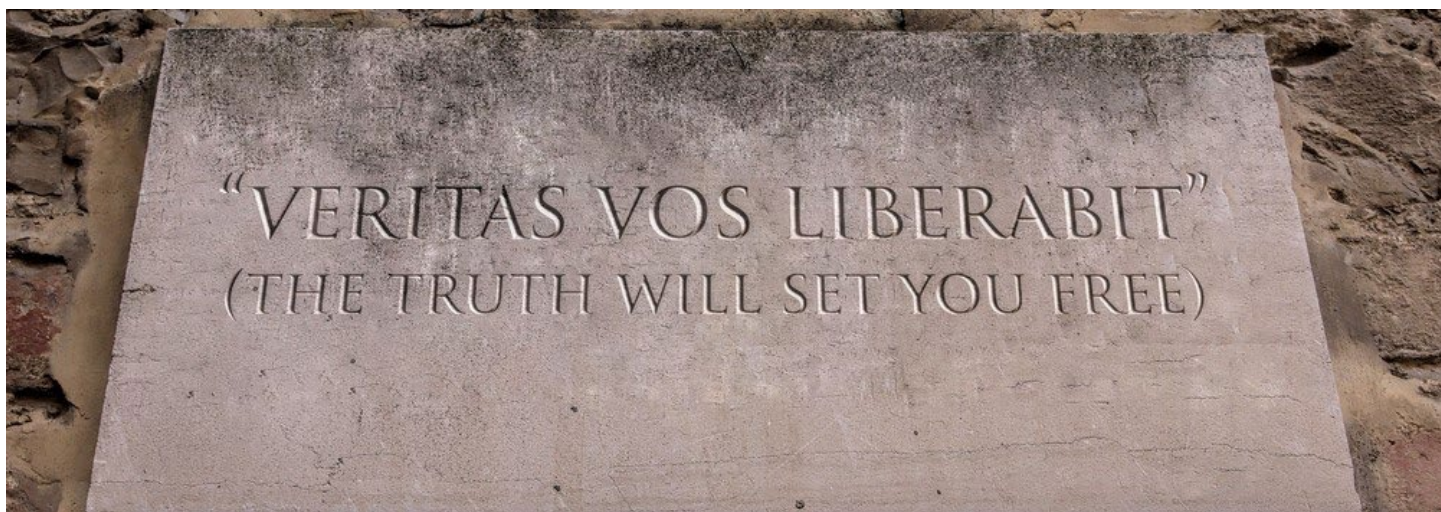
Pilate's conception of truth was strikingly modern, to the point of cynicism. His question about truth was an assertion, not an inquiry. In his world—much like ours—the definition of truth waxed and waned with the economic, political, and military power that sustained it. From this brief exchange alone it's easy to see why Jerusalem and Rome were ideologically incompatible.

### An Athenian “truth seeking” orientation on campus

Universities are ancient institutions, older than any nation. Many had religious foundations, but most harken back to a third great city, that of Athens—and Plato's academy. In this tradition, truth exists and is worth pursuing. The human capacity to see and know truth, however, is limited by our finite nature. Even on matters of life and death, Plato has Socrates say in the conclusion of his Apology that:

The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways -- I to die, and you to live. *Which is better God only knows* [emphasis added].

Grounded on this tradition, and molded by the methodology of science, our contemporary view of truth requires us to perceive truth as a working hypothesis--frequently actionable, but never permanent or unquestionable. We are, at heart, “truth-explorers” or “truth seekers” rather than absolute “truth finders.” Instead of lamenting that fact, science embraces the intellectual virtue of humility and leaves ample room for wonder and mystery.



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### Academic integrity, truth-seeking, and intellectual virtues

Terms like “truth” and “truth-seeking” require careful elaboration. I had to make that effort before suggesting an explicit connection to academic integrity and honor code traditions.

The capacity for truth-seeking suggests certain habits of mind. Those habits encompass intellectual virtues like humility, intellectual honesty, scholarly competence, critical self-discipline and judgment in using, extending, and transmitting knowledge.

I underlined the weighty words above because they’re not mine. They come from the [AAUP Statement of Professional Ethics](#).

The AAUP Statement also includes this specific reference to “truth-seeking”:

Professors, guided by a deep conviction of the worth and dignity of the advancement of knowledge, recognize the special responsibilities placed upon them. *Their primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it* [emphasis added].

The Statement then makes a logical connection with academic integrity:

Professors *make every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct* and to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student’s true merit [emphasis added].

Derek Bok, past President of Harvard University, described a similar connection between truth-seeking, intellectual virtue, and academic integrity in his classic 1988 article “Ethics, the University and Society” (May-June 1988 *Harvard Magazine*). “Scholarly values emphasizing accuracy and meticulousness,” he wrote, “reinforce high standards of intellectual honesty.” He concluded that teachers can help convey those values by “instill[ing] a greater respect for facts and a greater responsibility to reason carefully about complicated problems.” Bok also suggested (as I identify below) that students can advance comparable perspectives personally and among their peers through service on academic integrity honor committees.

Terms like “truth-seeking” and “intellectual honesty” may not inspire student engagement unless we convey the affective or emotional component behind them. Barry Schwartz (professor of social theory and social action at Swarthmore College) wrote in the June 18, 2015 [Chronicle Review](#) that:

[S]tudents need to *love the truth* to be good students [emphasis added]. Without this intellectual virtue, they will get things right only because we punish them for getting things wrong.

Students are more likely to learn how to “love truth” by [1] observing faculty role models who convey the joy and excitement of their “truth-seeking”; [2] being allowed to participate in ongoing research and discovery themselves; and [3] having leadership opportunities to defend and advance the truth-seeking mission of the university.

### Honor codes and a shared faculty-student commitment to truth-seeking

After more than 200 years of deliberations and committee meetings, Harvard [implemented an honor code](#) in 2015. At one [pertinent faculty meeting](#), (then) President Drew Faust asked:

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How do we sustain the most constructive culture possible for learning? How do we—we who have devoted our lives to scholarship and teaching—how do we affirm and transmit the value—and the excitement—of learning for its own sake to our students?

Comparable questions could be posed at any university, but I encounter them more often at schools with functional honor codes. That's because students at honor code schools are active participants in the academic integrity process and frequently relate it to their classroom experiences. I also think honor code schools typically focus less on mechanics of enforcement and more on enhancing engagement in learning.

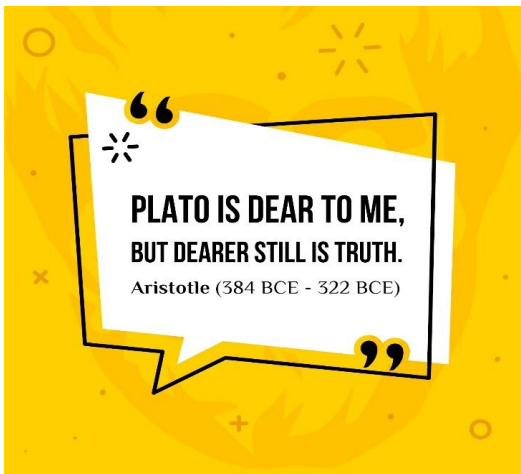
Consider this excerpt from a [history of the Princeton Honor Code](#):

“Examinations at the College of New Jersey (as Princeton University was then known) in the late 19th-century were rife with cheating; students saw cheating as a way to outwit the faculty, while professors went to great lengths to uncover undergraduate cheating. Booth Tarkington ‘1893, as quoted in W. Joseph Dehner, Jr.’s 1970 paper, described this rivalry as a “*continuous sly warfare between the professor and the student.*” Crib sheets were common, as was sharing answers during examinations. Students who refused to collaborate were ridiculed. Reporting fellow students to the faculty was seen as dishonorable and out of the question for most students. Professors, on the other hand, would spend exams stalking the recitation rooms watching for any inconsistencies, and sometimes hired extra sets of eyes for the purpose of catching cheaters” [emphasis added].

Don McCabe and others have emphasized that one of the primary benefits of functional honor codes is breaking through the “us v. them” (students vs. faculty) paradigm. And when we break through “us v. them,” we have more time and inclination to explore topics like truth-seeking and engagement in learning as joint enterprises with students.

### Truth-seeking and honor code traditions (a short preliminary summary)

Creating a shared faculty-student commitment to academic integrity is a critical starting point in promoting a truth-seeking orientation. Effective honor codes build upon that foundation to provide additional benefits:



#### [1] Honor codes help define the university as a truth-seeking community.

Much like the model of Plato’s Academy, knowledge and wisdom are viewed as a joint creation by teachers and students. Whether known explicitly or otherwise, this innovation is a major part of the attractiveness of Western universities to students across the world.

#### [2] Honor code traditions help students internalize intellectual virtues associated with truth seeking.

Derek Bok, *supra*, stressed this point when he suggested: “[p]erhaps the greatest benefit of honor systems is the stimulus they give to students to think about their own moral responsibility and to discuss the subject among themselves.”

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### [3] Honor systems seem especially effective at promoting constructive habituation.

Starting with orientation ceremonies and expanding to regular use of honor pledges and other “timely reminders,” honor committees consistently seek to help students avoid academic dishonesty by developing the truth-seeking habits associated with a commitment to academic integrity.

### [4] Students who serve on honor committees may display and enhance critical skills in ethical leadership.

I think we may underestimate the leadership skills frequently displayed and enhanced by service on honor committees. Students who make a public commitment to academic integrity and who work to foster it may crystalize and internalize values likely to last for a lifetime. Imagine the likely benefits if we had experienced and dedicated honor committee members --practiced in living and articulating a commitment to truth-seeking and intellectual honesty--serving on more corporate boards and government institutions nationwide.

### [5] Honor code traditions foster self-corrective discussion about values associated with truth-seeking and intellectual honesty.

The regular flow of new students and new student perspectives through honor committees can provide a forum for continuous improvement in academic integrity programming and administration. Possible improvements need not be limited to academic integrity policies and regulations. They may also include broader cultural innovations like the University of Virginia Honor Committee “[Diversity Initiative Grants](#)” designed “with the purpose of celebrating minority students who have made significant contributions to the University community.”

### [6] Honor codes encourage greater student participation in developing new ways of teaching and learning.

Many honor committees nationwide share suggestions with faculty members about pedagogies likely to enhance learning and reduce academic dishonesty. A summary of guidance typically provided can be seen in the document: [Advice from Students to Faculty Members on Protecting Academic Integrity](#) (developed by Syracuse University and the [Academic Integrity Seminar](#)).

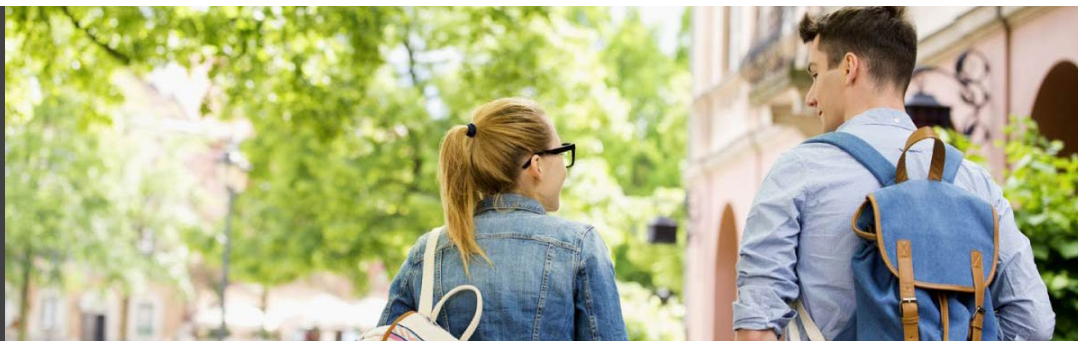
### [7] Honor codes often create memorable traditions.

Few components of campus life --with the likely exception of athletics--inspire more enduring memories than honor code traditions. Those traditions, like the signing of honor pledges on major tests and assignments, inspire frequent alumni inquiries about “how the honor code is doing.” Alumni inquiries about honor codes are the result of thoughtful cultural habituation. The insights associated with that kind of habituation can inspire a lifetime of commitment--like Don McCabe’s foundational research on academic integrity, grounded on his memories of the Honor Code at Princeton.

## Conclusion

We end at our beginning. Clearly there’s a sense of a deep flaw threatening our society. President Obama explicitly saw the danger in the excerpt I cited from his Farewell Address. That flaw is grounded in a failure to define, appreciate and practice a shared commitment to truth-seeking. It’s evident in this regard that the values associated with honor code traditions have relevance far beyond our campuses (they always have). The intellectual virtues associated with truth-seeking--virtues we seek to acquire, but can never fully achieve--are no longer abstractions. They seem more important now because we, as a society, seem so close to losing them.

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## About the Author



Gary Pavela

Gary Pavela is a nationally recognized writer and consultant on law and policy issues in higher education. He was part of the team that developed the University of Maryland Code of Academic Integrity--one of the first "modified Honor Codes" in the United States. In 2006 he was recognized as the University of Maryland "Outstanding Faculty Educator" by the Maryland Parents' Association. Pavela has served on the Board of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University and is a past president of the International Center for Academic Integrity. He is a Fellow of the National Association of College and University Attorneys.

## About AIS



Academic Integrity Seminar offers demanding, personalized online seminars administered to students at colleges and universities across the country. It is used for ethical development programming, honor council and hearing board training, and as remediation for violations of university honor codes and codes of conduct. Students are usually assigned by referring educational institutions.

The Seminar is designed to help students examine the importance of social trust and the components of emotional intelligence required to sustain it. We also seek to enhance critical thinking skills and help students write persuasive, well-reasoned essays.

Learn more at [www.integrityseminar.org](http://www.integrityseminar.org)

### **Q: How does AIS encourage truth seeking?**

Consistent with the themes developed above, our [Academic Integrity Seminar](#) readings and assignments are designed to help students see the value in thinking through problems and doing their own work. Likewise, the way in which the Seminar is conducted (interactive dialogue with tutors) encourages students to appreciate the benefits of intellectual exploration--rather than the recitation of programmed answers. These and other related topics are also discussed on our [Academic Integrity Facebook Group](#).