

Remarks of President Jim Ryan at Vox Alumni Event, March 16, 2022

Welcome everyone. I'm sorry we are not in person but am nonetheless grateful to have this opportunity to talk about a topic that is near and dear to many of us: the Honor Code, which prohibits lying, cheating and stealing; and the Honor System, which is the process by which honor offenses are adjudicated and sanctioned. I know from many conversations with alumni that the Honor Code and Honor System were—and remain—one of the defining features of their time here, and it has continued to shape their lives since leaving Grounds. I also know from many conversations with students that the Honor Code remains important to them. Regardless of their views of the Honor System, including the sanctions, students I have spoken to—and I have spoken to many—respect the Honor Code and appreciate what it means to live in a community of trust.

I know you are here to listen to the current and some former chairs of the Honor Committee, so I will be brief. Before I offer some observations, I'd like to thank Lily West for her leadership of the Alumni Association, and to thank both Lily and Richard Gard for suggesting this event. I would also like to thank our Rector, Whitt Clement, for his abiding interest in this topic and for his desire to connect current students with alumni so that they can share their views about the honor system and learn from each other. I see this event as contributing to that effort.

I would like to offer just three observations. First, as most of you have probably heard, earlier this month, about 25% of the student body voted in the referendum to amend the single-sanction expulsion penalty in favor of a two-semester suspension. This referendum passed overwhelmingly, with roughly 80% of the votes. As I said to the Board of Visitors at our recent meeting earlier this month, if I were a student, I would have voted against this change. It is not because I believe the single sanction of expulsion is sacrosanct and necessary for an effective honor system. To the contrary, I personally believe in the possibility and the power of redemption.

That said, I believe it is a mistake to replace the single sanction of expulsion with a single sanction of suspension that carries with it an automatic right of readmission—regardless of the severity of the offense or whether students have accepted responsibility or whether they have made amends. I believe we should ask more of our students. I would prefer a system where the sanction is at least a year, and students are readmitted only if they have shown some proof that they have learned from the incident and made amends. That would be a system that is both humane and educational. As it stands now, the student who accepts full responsibility before trial will be treated identically with the student who is found guilty after a trial and still refuses to take responsibility. That is both inequitable and creates a system that is not oriented around helping students learn from their mistakes. My hope is that these problems will be discussed by the panelists today and addressed in the future.

The second point I would like to make is an obvious one but worth saying: I'm no longer a student here, which means I did not get to vote. The Honor System is, in many respects, the epitome of one of our strongest and most important traditions: student self-governance. The Honor System is run by and for our students, and they have the right to change it. The fact that they did may be worrisome to some, but accepting student self-governance means accepting that students will make some decisions that their elders would not have made. My disappointment is that only about 25% of the student body voted. If there is anything to be worried about with respect to this election, that's what I would—and do—worry about.

The third and final point is to address the concern that because of this change, the Honor System is effectively dead. I disagree. To begin, the heart of the Honor System is not the sanction but the Honor Code. And the Honor System works best—and becomes a way of life—when students internalize the Honor Code. Sanctions incentivize students to pay attention to the Honor Code, but I believe during their time here students can and do learn to appreciate what it means to live in a community of trust, and they come to see the value of living their lives honorably.

In addition, instead of weakening the Honor System, I think it's more likely that this change will reinvigorate it. As most know, case numbers have dropped over time, as have guilty verdicts. Anecdotally, students report reluctance to use the Honor System or to find students guilty because they believe expulsion is too harsh a punishment for many offenses. Faculty say the same and also complain—with justification—that the process is time-consuming, burdensome, and somewhat byzantine. Reducing the severity of the sanction, in this context, could lead to greater enforcement of honor offenses, especially if improvements are made to the process so that faculty are more likely to use it.

This is not the first change to the Honor System, and I hope and expect it will not be the last. But the Honor Code endures, as it should, and we will continue to do all that we can to ensure it remains a vital part of what it means to be a student at the University of Virginia.