

Abstract

This study examined students' perceptions towards a hypothetical food honor system for making purchases in an academic building on a college campus. The inquiry was guided by several open-ended questions concerning whether students prefer, would use, and might be dishonest in their use of a food honor system. Results indicate that the majority of students were initially excited about the proposition of a food honor system. Students also articulated many disadvantages and limitations of the food honor system. Overall, there was a generally positive reaction to this system based on its convenience and proposed location. Limitations and future directions are discussed.

There's no such thing as a free lunch; Using a grounded theory approach to understand perceptions of a hypothetical food honor system

Dishonesty and deception are two common forms of communication. They are everywhere, including college campuses. College is considered by most to be a *moral community* or a place where there is great emphasis put on honor and honesty. However, academic misconduct, theft, and interpersonal deceit are still prevalent at college campuses. Over the last few years, research on deception has grown in popularity. This could be because of the problem of academic misconduct on college campuses. It could also be because of the rise in popularity of deceit detection in pop culture (e.g., Fox's *Lie to Me* and *Penn and Teller: Fool Us*). At the center of the college campus is the dichotomy of deceit and honor. Colleges as moral communities strive to uphold moral tenants, with some institutions going as far as making their students swear to an honor code (Melendez, 1985).

Moral communities perpetuate positive moral emotions such as elevation and empathy. Melendez (1985) found that people who abided by the moral principles set out by honor codes found there was something to gain. It is possible that these positive aspects of moral integrity could translate when applied to a food honor system.

Honor Systems

Honor systems and honor codes serve to set a moral example for the people who are supposed to abide by them. At college campuses all across the country, honor codes promote the ideas of truthfulness and diligence. Colleges and universities perpetuate the idea that they are moral communities where deception is at a minimum. However, in academic settings, peer monitored honor systems have been shown to be ineffective without the threat of severe

consequences. Students simply cannot be counted on to report dishonesty consistently (Mathews, 1999). It is reasonable to postulate that food honor systems may bring similar results.

Food theft could be a major limiting factor to the success of a food honor system on a college campus. Peer pressure to turn a blind eye to theft has been shown to outweigh the value of moral integrity and respect of honor systems (Trevino, 1993). However, this does not necessarily mean students would not be interested by the idea of a food honor system, especially when convenience is at a premium for most college students. At the college where we conducted this study, food options on campus are often viewed as limited. The campus has a deficiency of quick, on-the-go food options. Therefore, this inquiry was motivated by our interest in discovering if students would favor a food honor system on their campus. With this thought in mind, we asked our first research questions:

RQ1: What are students' reactions or thoughts to a hypothetical food honor system in their academic building?

RQ2: What types of food and beverages do students desire in the specific building for the hypothetical food honor system?

RQ3: How often would students use this type of system in comparison to traditional food service systems found at other places on their campus?

Predictors of Dishonesty

Instead of being characteristics one simply possesses, honor and morality may be more heavily tied to a person's innate personality traits. Studies have shown that people that possess certain character traits are predisposed to be more honest and moral, especially in an academic setting. Students who tested higher for conscientiousness and agreeableness were more likely to abstain from cheating on a test. However, students who tested higher for neuroticism and

extraversion seemed to be more likely to cheat (Aslam, 2011). It is reasonable to assume that these finding could translate to a food honor system context.

Income was also shown to be a main factor in the capacity and willingness to be honest. Parental income at the early stages of childhood and adolescence had a significant effect on children's capacity to deceive. The higher the parental income was, the more likely the child would be honest when faced with a moralistic decision (Mercer, 2015). Antisocial behavior has also been linked with criminal behavior in adolescents (Pajer, 2014). With personality traits theorized as being at the center of dishonesty, we wanted to find out what could be the external predictors for dishonesty. These thoughts led us to these questions:

RQ4: What types of things may influence students' honesty related to this honor system?

RQ5: What are ways that you think students might engage in dishonesty when using the system?

Advantages and Drawbacks of Honor Systems

Honor systems have many advantages and drawbacks. An obvious drawback is that with the presence of only an honor system, there is no guaranteed way to stop incidences of dishonesty and deception. However, some studies show that the existence of an honor system significantly decreases the prevalence of these incidences (May, 1993). Honor systems encourage thinking about the means to an end, rather than just the end. They reinforce the ideas that moral communities are built upon (Hein, 1982).

As stated above, honor systems (especially ones without severe consequences) cannot prevent the majority of deceitful acts. Societal pressures will still cause shame and social exile to the informant, or rat. Simply, honor systems are unable to account for all disingenuous behavior.

Even with severe consequences in place, systems that depend upon peer reporting have not been effective (McCabe, 1993). This leads to our final research questions:

RQ6: What are some advantages or benefits of this type of honor system?

RQ7: What are some possible limitations of this type of honor system?

Methods

Potential plans were being discussed for an honor system based food court at the large, Southern university where this study took place. There were questions about how frequently this honor system based food court would be used, how comfortable students were with the concept of having an unattended food court in their college, and how students could be deceptive or dishonest within the context of an honor system. First, we approached the dean of the college where this food court would potentially be located, and asked if it would be appropriate to survey students in the college about their ideas and attitudes towards the hypothetical food honor system. The dean granted us permission to create and distribute the survey to students in classes being held in the college.

Sampling

The institutional research board approved this research before any data collection took place. The online survey reached a total of 181 undergraduate students who were recruited from introductory-level communication courses. Extra credit was provided to students who participated in the survey. Among all responses, one respondent refused to disclose any relevant information. Of the 180 responses, 119 were female (41.3%) and 61 were male (21.2%). Also, 17 were freshmen (5.9 %), 60 were sophomores (20.8%), 68 were juniors (23.6%) and 33 were seniors (11.5%).

Questionnaire

Our questionnaire was aimed at gauging students' thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards having a food honor system in their college. It asked students to describe what types of foods they would most like to see in an honor system food court. The questionnaire was also designed to provide insight into students' thoughts on what influenced honesty in an honor system, and the ways students could be dishonest in an honor system. Finally, the questionnaire asked students how often they would use the honor system food court in comparison to other food options on campus.

The last section of the questionnaire consisted of demographic questions such as age, gender, major, and students' GPA.

Analysis

We used a grounded theory approach to analyze our data. First, we used a constant comparative technique (Charmaz, 2000) to assign participants' answers into categories that arose from the data. Any answers or data that could not be categorized fell into the category of "other". Next, we combined any similar categories using an axial coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The goal was to make each category as mutually exclusive as possible. Disagreements about the exclusivity of the codes were resolved through discussion. The first author then created a codebook after all of the thematic coding was completed. The codebook contains the names of the categories, a descriptive example of each category, the frequency in which an answer fell into each category, and the percentage of answers that are contained in each category.

Results

The first research question (*RQ1*) gauged students' general thoughts about a food honor system. Over half (51%) of the students that took the survey had a positive reaction to the honor

system food court. 20.8% of the students surveyed expressed a feeling of distrust towards others using the food honor system. Finally, 17% thought implementing a food honor system would be a bad idea.

The second research question (*RQ2*) asked what foods students would most prefer in a food honor system. 34.1% of the students surveyed wanted primarily lunch foods in the honor system food court. 32.4% of participants wanted primarily snack foods. 20.3% of answers could not easily be categorized. Finally, 13.2% of students surveyed wanted the honor system food court to provide a more healthy option than most other places on campus.

The third research question (*RQ3*) gauged how often students would use the food honor system. 44.5% of the students surveyed said they would use the honor system food court often. 35.7% of participants said they would not use the system often. 6.5% of students surveyed said that the frequency at which they used the food honor system depended on the food selection of the system. 6.5% said that the frequency at which they used the system was dependent on how convenient it was for them to use the food honor system.

The fourth research question (*RQ4*) gauged students' thoughts on what influenced honesty in a food honor system. 40% of participants said surveillance was the most important factor that influenced honesty. 36.3% of answers could not be categorized. 16.1% of participants thought that money or finances were the biggest factor in determining whether a student would be honest. Finally, 11% of participants said that peer pressure was the biggest factor in honesty in a food honor system.

The fifth research question (*RQ5*) asked participants about how they thought students would engage in dishonesty when using a food honor system. 70% of participants thought that theft was a major way students would engage in dishonesty. 18.7% thought that not paying for

all of a meal was a major way students would engage in dishonesty. 3.8% thought lying was a major factor in student dishonesty within a food honor system.

The sixth research question (*RQ6*) asked about the advantages or benefits of having a food honor system in the college. 40.6% of the participants said convenience was the biggest benefit of the food honor system. 39.6% of answers were not easily categorized. 14.2% of participants said that the money saved by not having to hire workers was the biggest advantage of the food honor system. 12.6% of participants said the encouragement of honesty was the biggest benefit.

The seventh research question (*RQ7*) inquired about the limitations of a food honor system. 50% of the students surveyed said that dishonesty was a major limitation of the food honor system. 37.9% of answers could not easily be categorized. 8.8% of students surveyed said that a financial loss was a major limitation. Finally, 7.1% of the participants said that the limited selection and quality of food was a major limiting factor.

Discussion

There is no shortage of literature on honor systems. There is an abundance of literature that covers everything from the relative effectiveness of academic honor systems, to the early predictors of dishonesty and deceit, and even to the cognitive dissonance that surrounds the concept of *ratting someone out*. However, there is a shortage of research concerning the implementation of an honor system into a food distribution setting. This study also provides a unique perspective on students' moral evaluations of themselves and their peers in a food honor system setting. This study seeks to begin a discussion on how personality traits, personal experiences, financial background, and expectations of a "moral community" play into the perceived success or failure of a large scale food honor system. This study is not trying to predict

the success of a tangible food honor system in an academic setting. The research questions that we proposed to the dean at the onset of this study were geared more towards uncovering students' overall perceptions of a food honor system. It also let us explore what could be some of the strengths and limitations inherent in such a system.

Our first research question allowed us to gauge students' initial reactions to proposition of building an honor system based cafeteria in their college. Over 50% of the students we surveyed had an extremely positive reaction to this proposition. Even more had a positive reaction with a condition such as: "... if people use it honestly," or "It is risky, but..." 25.2% of the students we surveyed had an overall negative reaction to the idea, calling it a financial loss or a bad idea. There was a small amount of answers that contained neither a positive or a negative reaction to the idea. Instead, some pointed out that the idea was unusual. However, there was an overwhelming amount of support for the idea of a food honor system being built—so much so that the amount of support almost doubled the amount of dissent.

Our second question asked students what type of food(s) they wanted to see in the food honor system. Essentially, we asked the students what type of restaurant could support a food honor system. A majority of the students (66.5%) wanted either lunch or snack foods in the food honor system. 13.2% wanted healthier food options. 9.9% wanted café type foods, and 7.6% wanted fast food chains. Two common themes running throughout all of these categories is quickness and convenience. The majority of the students we surveyed expressed the need for a quick, convenient food option close to where they spend most of their time on campus. This type of response could mean that there is a void for these types of food establishments on campus. It could also mean that most of the participants felt that this was the best use for a food honor system. Most likely, it is a combination of both. This leads us into our third question.

Our third question asked participants how often they would visit the proposed food honor system. About 45% of the participants said they would visit often while around 36% said they would not. Factors such as convenience, food diversity, and the location of the food court also played major roles in the decisions to visit the food honor system.

Our fourth question asked participants to infer what factors could influence students' honesty related to a food honor system. The category that contained the most responses was surveillance (40%). Surveillance (or even the threat of surveillance) is a common theft deterrent in most markets and places of exchange. It has been shown many times in other studies that surveillance is an effective and efficient way to dissuade customers from dishonesty. Another prominent response type was financial situations (16.1%). As we discussed earlier, finances have been shown to be a very prominent factor in the predisposition towards dishonesty. Essentially, the less money you have, the more likely you are to be deceitful (Mercer, 2015). This is not to say people with less income are inherently deceitful and immoral, but rather they sometimes cannot afford to be completely transparent in the same way that individuals that are more financially stable can. Responses that fell into the finances category illustrate this point—one student in our study even remarked that "...some students here can't afford to eat three full meals a day." Another prominent viewpoint was that peer pressure greatly influenced a student's willingness to be honest (11%). Responses illustrated the cognitive dissonance that goes hand in hand with peer reported crimes. Other responses described mob mentality. They described the idea that once one student saw occurrences of theft, he or she would be more likely to engage in theft themselves. One of the more interesting things about this question was the range of outcomes that were described. While some answers described solutions to dishonesty, others described predictors and causes of dishonesty.

Expanding on that idea, the fifth research question asked participants how they thought would-be deceivers would engage in dishonesty. Overwhelmingly, the most prevalent answer was theft (74.1% of responses). Responses that were unable to be categorized made up 25.3% of the responses. For example, one student in our study said that "...using others' information to pay," would be a significant way students would engage in dishonesty.

The sixth research question asked participants to describe potential advantages of the food honor system. Convenience (40%) was the most prominent theme pertaining to this question. Students again expressed their desire for a convenient food option close to their classes. Employees becoming less necessary (14.2%) was also a significant theme. Not having to pay employees to work was seen as an advantage because it saved the university money. Finally, the encouragement of honesty perpetuated by the food honor system was seen as an advantage by 12.6% of participants. Responses illustrate the idea that the food honor system could be an "honesty catalyst" for the rest of the campus.

Our final research question asked about the potential limitations of the honor system. Half of the responses pointed to dishonesty as the main limitation of the honor system. Stealing, lying, and cheating were all components of the dishonesty that the responses described. Some of these responses also contained aspects of the third person effect. Participants described how they would be honest when confronted with a moral choice, but also describing how others would not. The financial loss stemming from such dishonesty was also described as a major drawback (8.8% of responses). In summary, the major drawbacks associated with a food honor system seemed to be the inevitable dishonesty of the students, the inability to enforce rules or consequences, and the financial loss that appears due to the combination of the first two factors.

In conclusion, a food honor system seems to be a very appealing idea to the average college student. The idea of a quick convenient meal within an arm's reach is very appetizing. While there are obvious downfalls to the honor system, they are easy to overlook. However, these inevitable problems need to be taken into account when planning out a food honor system. Behind all of the support for food honor systems, college students are likely to be attracted to the idea that they can deceptively get a free lunch.

Limitations and Future Research

To expand this research, it would be beneficial to collect data beyond one college at one university. Even expanding the inquiry to beyond one college at a university would give us a better picture of the support or dissent for food honor systems. Our study acted as a good launching off point for this type of research and serves to give the dean of the college some things to think about in planning a prospective food honor system. A likely next step before implementing an actual food honor system might be to put a small-scale food honor system in place that is monitored for theft to determine if such a system could be profitable and beneficial for the building on this campus.

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Question 1: What is your reaction or thoughts to a food honor system in Reese Phifer?

Code	Examples	Number	Percent
Good	<p>"I think it would be a great idea."</p> <p>"Like me some of that."</p> <p>"I think it would be great and all buildings should have it."</p>	94	51%
Distrust of others	<p>"...if people use it honestly"</p> <p>"...can result in loss due to dishonest nature of some human beings."</p>	38	20.8%
Bad idea	<p>"Bad idea. Kids would take advantage of the system and steal everything."</p> <p>"It seems like an odd idea for a public place."</p>	31	17%
Other/ miscellaneous	<p>"I really do not know what you mean by 'honor system'".</p> <p>"...we should be mature enough to have one."</p>	27	14.8%
Financial loss	<p>"You are going to lose a lot of money."</p> <p>"...Reese Phifer would lose money."</p>	15	8.2%
Novelty	<p>"Very interesting. Honestly do not know how well it would work."</p> <p>"I think it's a cool idea, but I do not see it working."</p>	12	6.5%
Risks involved	<p>"I think it's a risky system to try"</p> <p>"It is risky, but people of our age should be mature enough to have one."</p>	9	4.9%

Question 2: What types of food/beverages would you like to see if this food honor system is implemented?

Code	Examples	Number	Percentage
Lunch foods	“Water, sandwiches, sushi.” “Quick items such as premade sandwiches, salads, and fast food.”	62	34.1%
Snack foods	“Water bottles, soda, vending machines food.” “Fruits, chips, other quick snacks”	59	32.4%
Other/ miscellaneous	“The typical pre-packaged stuff and fresh to go things (same as Julia's Kitchen).” “Other students”	37	20.3%
Healthier food options	“Fresh foods! Soups, caprese salad, sandwiches, fruit.”	24	13.2%
Coffee/café food	“Iced coffee, to go coffee beverages” “Coffee”	18	9.9%
Fast food chains	“Chik-Fil-A” “Starbucks, Chik-Fil-A”	14	7.6%
Emulate other places on campus	“Something quick and easy. Like how they do in Lloyd Hall. Chips, soda machine, sandwiches.” “Similar to Mary B's”	9	4.9%

Question 3: How often would you use this type of system in comparison to a traditional food service system such as that found in Lloyd Hall?

Code	Examples	Number	Percentage
Often	“Pretty often. I have social anxiety and worry a lot when it comes to getting food for some reason; no judgement.”	81	44.5%
Less often	“Considering I practically live in Reese Phifer, all of the time.” “Honestly, not a lot because of the food I get at my fraternity house.” “Not that much. This is the last class I'll take in this building.”	65	35.7%
Other/ miscellaneous	“N/A” “I would try it and go from there.”	26	14.3%
Food options dependent	“Depends on what food is served there.” “Lloyd has unhealthy food such as Chick-Fil-A and Pizza Hut. If it was healthy choices, I would definitely use it.”	12	6.5%
Convenience dependent	“If I'm in a hurry I would use it, otherwise I would go somewhere else.” “I believe this would be a faster system for when I'm on the go.”	12	6.5%
Location dependent	“Depends on where I am, but a lot more if it was easier and quicker, and the quality of food was the same.”	8	4.3%
As frequently as other food systems	“I'd use it if I'm in the building, just like I would if I were in Lloyd.” “I would use it just as frequently as I would a traditional food service system.” “Probably just as much if the food quality is good.”	8	4.4%

Question 4: What types of things may influence students' honesty related to this honor system?

Code	Examples	Number	Percentage
Surveillance (or lack of)	<p>“Someone watching or cameras would deter dishonesty”</p> <p>“Knowing that they are being recorded.”</p>	72	40%
Other/ miscellaneous	<p>“How hungry they are...”</p> <p>“Rewards of some sort after honestly purchasing something.”</p>	66	36.3%
Financial reasons	<p>“The amount of money a student has. Some students here can't afford to eat three full meals a day.”</p> <p>“Amount of dining dollars left how much money is in their bank account, how much cash they have.”</p>	29	16.1%
Peer pressure	<p>“Other students not following the honor system. They see someone take, they will copy.”</p> <p>“If a student sees it being taken advantage of, they may be more likely to be dishonest.”</p>	20	11%
Personal ethics	<p>“How they were raised and their personal morals.”</p> <p>“Their conscience.”</p>	11	6%
More convenient to steal	<p>“...how late for class they are.”</p> <p>“...Maybe they are in a rush.”</p>	9	4.9%

Question 5: What are ways that you think students might engage in dishonesty when using the system?

Code	Examples	Number	Percentage
Theft	<p>“Stealing the food and drinks, not paying for merchandise.”</p> <p>“Take food without paying for any or all of it.”</p>	135	74.1%
Other/miscellaneous	<p>“N/A”</p> <p>“Peer pressure and no one watching them participate in dishonest activity”</p>	46	25.3%
Not paying full amount	<p>“They don't ring up all that they are buying.”</p> <p>“Taking more than they paid for.”</p>	34	18.7%
Lying	<p>“Saying they will bring their money tomorrow and then don't.”</p> <p>“Lying about the amount being paid.”</p>	7	3.8%

Codebook for Question 6: What are some advantages or benefits of this type of honor system?

Code	Examples	Number	Percentage
Convenience	<p>“It would be quick, convenient, and readily available all of the time.”</p> <p>“Using an ACT card would be a very quick transaction. Just swipe and go.”</p>	74	40.6%
Other/ miscellaneous	<p>“Establishing more trust/ better communication between students and the university.”</p> <p>“I don't understand the honor system.”</p>	72	39.6%
Reduces workforce	<p>“University saves money by not hiring employees.”</p> <p>“Don't have to pay for an employee 24 hours a day.”</p>	26	14.2%
Encourages honesty	<p>“Encourages honesty among students and keeping others honest.”</p> <p>“Hopefully it will give some students personal responsibility.”</p>	23	12.6%
Food options in Reese Phifer	<p>“It would be convenient to have a place to eat in Reese Phifer.”</p> <p>“Food access where all my classes are.”</p>	15	8.2%

Codebook for Question 7: What are some possible limitations of this type of honor system?

Code	Examples	Number	Percentage
Dishonesty	<p>“People steal. They see easy things to take and steal them.”</p> <p>“People could steal and there would be no accountability.”</p>	91	50%
Other/ miscellaneous	<p>“You have to figure out how to work the cash register”</p> <p>“How y'all choose to accept money. I never have cash.”</p>	69	37.9%
Financial loss	<p>“Could lose a lot of money form people stealing.”</p> <p>“It may fail quickly.”</p>	16	8.8%
Quality of food/food Options	<p>“More expensive healthy options may not be feasible because they are higher losses when stolen.”</p> <p>“Quality of food, they can't offer better choices because if stolen, it would be a greater loss.”</p>	13	7.1%
Running out of food	<p>“Food would run out or drinks because no one is monitoring.”</p> <p>“Running out of food because no one is restocking.”</p>	10	5.4%
Lack of rule enforcement	<p>“No way to make sure students pay...”</p> <p>“Can't have too much of security.”</p>	10	5.4%