

USAF Academy: Cheating Scandal During COVID Lockdown Ensnares 249 Cadets

The Air Force Academy believes 249 cadets cheated on exams and other assignments during the rapid shift to remote learning during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic last spring. In a 22 JAN release, the academy said those cadets are suspected of violating the school's honor code in a variety of ways — from failing to properly cite sources and looking up answers on unauthorized tutoring websites while taking exams to completing final exams in small groups.

Most of those cadets have admitted to cheating and have been placed on probation and remediation for six months, said officials at the academy, located in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The rest of the cases are pending, and are at various stages. Two cadets have been dismissed from the academy for cheating, academy spokesman Michael Slater said in a follow-up email. The cadets involved were spread across the lower three classes of 2021, 2022 and 2023, Slater said. No cadets who graduated in the class of 2020 last year were involved, he said.

Superintendent Lt. Gen. Richard Clark has ordered the first review of the academy's honor program in years as a result of the cheating scandal, the academy said. The review seeks to recommend ways to improve the honor program so it properly develops cadets' character and teaches them to follow the academy's honor code: "We will not lie, steal or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does." "The Honor Code is not only foundational to the Air Force Academy, but it serves as a guide for cadets to live an honorable life, whether serving in uniform or not," Clark said. "Honor serves as one of my fundamental institutional priorities for developing leaders of character."

Academy officials concluded last spring that they could not effectively separate all 4,000 or so cadets on campus to the degree necessary to prevent the coronavirus from spreading. Three-quarters of the students were sent home over an eight-day period — the first time this had happened in the academy's history — and the school quickly shifted to remote learning. But without in-person supervision over the next few months, some cadets allegedly resorted to cheating. Academic safeguards put in place by the dean of faculty detected infractions, which prompted the academy to launch investigations, the release said.

However, the process of working through possible honor code infractions is taking longer than usual due to the pandemic. Because cadets are in charge, the work could not begin until all students returned to Colorado Springs for the fall semester last year. Even after the process began, it proceeded slower than usual because of COVID restrictions, the release said. The academy believes probation and remediation will likely be enough for those cadets to learn their lesson. More than 90 percent of cadets who go through remediation do not offend again, the academy said.

Cadets who have violated the honor code are also not allowed to represent the academy until they have finished their required remediation. "Remediation is a consequence and not an act of leniency," Clark said. "If earned, remediation provides an opportunity to reset the moral compass and deepen a cadet's understanding of and respect for the Honor Code. Developing leaders of character is not without life lessons and learning from these mistakes."

The academy said Clark “has complete confidence” in its academic integrity, and that it is putting measures in place to try to deter cadets from future violations of the honor code. These measures include better using technology to monitor for plagiarism, and monitoring websites in real time to identify when cadets are improperly sharing information with one another. The academy has also developed supplemental course content and resources to improve cadets’ learning.