Caltech

HONOR CODE HANDBOOK

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Dear Student,

“No member of the Caltech Community shall take unfair advantage of any other member of the community.” This simple statement is the guiding principle of Caltech’s Honor System, and a fundamental value of the Institute.

The most exceptional feature of the honor code is how seriously it is respected by students and faculty alike. We all proudly believe in the Honor System. It provides the essential foundation for our trust and mutual respect. Ask any Caltech graduate what they found to be special about this place, and chances are that the Honor System will head the list.

I am pleased to welcome you as a full partner into our Honor System.

Sincerely,

Lesley Nye
Interim Dean of Undergraduate Students

Philosophy of the Honor Code System

The Honor Code allows students the trust and freedom that honesty merits. It states simply that "No member of the Caltech community shall take unfair advantage of any other member of the Caltech community." Because of its nature, this principle applies to all members of the community, everywhere within the community. It is not restricted to transactions of a purely academic nature between students and faculty.

The Honor Code is not an administrative creation intended to ease the enforcement of Institute regulations, or marginally decrease the chances of a student cheating. Rather, it allows students and faculty an unusual level of trust in one another, and affords students uncommon opportunities. For example, exam proctoring is discouraged under current faculty regulations, because faculty simply expect students to follow the Honor Code. Students also assume that their personal belongings will be safe in protected common areas within the residences—because of the Honor Code.

It must be stressed that responsibility for the preservation of the Honor System lies with each individual student, and each new generation of students. It requires us to consider any possible consequences of our own actions: Does it impact another community member, and how? The key words are "unfair advantage." To not take unfair advantage, it is often sufficient to simply employ common sense and show respect for others. But there are times when distinguishing fair and unfair courses of action requires a considerable amount of thought. Failure to realize the consequences of a course of action does not justify it.

The rewards of life under the Honor System are considerable. The responsibilities at times are equally considerable, but it is through such challenges that we grow our individual character and integrity. These obligations have been met successfully in the past, and only we can ensure that they will continue to be met.

Living Under the Honor Code

Stealing from another student is a violation, just as is cheating on a Physics test. However, the Honor System is not limited to examples such as these; any action which places a member of the Caltech community at an unfair disadvantage may be a violation.

The Honor System covers every aspect of our interactions with members of the Caltech community. In addition to undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty, the Caltech community also includes administrative and scientific support staff, campus maintenance and custodial staff, and in some instances other companies or institutions which have relations with Caltech. Actions against people who are not direct members of the Caltech community may eventually become Honor System offenses if they result in action being taken against the Caltech community. They also may be treated as a policy violation.

Consequently, it is impossible to give a set of comprehensive examples that displays every possible situation in which the Honor System must be carefully applied. Therefore, the purpose of the following discussion is to outline a few areas of life at Caltech and demonstrate how the principles of the Honor System should be considered.

I. Tests

Academic life at Caltech is very different from life at a high school or another college. The vast majority of quizzes and midterm or final examinations are take-home. Stapled-shut tests are picked up in class or at a professor's office. Printed instructions on the cover of the test specify the conditions under which it must be taken, including the time limit, reference materials allowed, and the due date. The test may be taken at any time and at any place the student wishes, as long as the instructions are followed. If there is any confusion concerning allowed references or time limits, it is your responsibility as a student to seek clarification from the professor or a teaching assistant.

Violating an exam policy takes unfair advantage of other students in the class and compromises the trust of the instructor. In particular, a student working on a take-home exam should not consult students or sources other than those permitted by the instructor. This includes adding photocopies of other references to one's course notes when the instructor allows only course notes during the exams.

Any work done after the time limit of an exam should be clearly designated as such by drawing a line beneath the work completed during the allowed time, labeling this line, and then continuing with the test, indicating the amount of extra time spent. Many professors will give some credit for this work.

If you have a disability that needs to be accommodated with extra time on an exam, please make sure you are registered with Caltech Accessibility Services for Students (CASS). Students who need disability accommodations have the responsibility to initiate a request for accommodations with CASS prior to the time such an accommodation is needed. Retroactive accommodations will not be granted, which means that students will not be able to re-do assignments or re-take exams with accommodations which they originally took before they asked for and received accommodations.

II. Homework and Laboratory Assignments

Instructors should state their policies regarding collaboration and related concerns at the beginning of each academic term. It is your responsibility as a student to get this information. If the policy seems ambiguous, actively seek clarification from the instructor. Violating a collaboration policy takes unfair advantage of those who abide by the restrictions placed on them, and compromises the trust of the instructor. In general, both student and instructor share the responsibility for clarifying any rules governing a particular course. When in doubt, a student should consult the instructor before proceeding.

These principles also apply to laboratory course work and research. Falsification or theft of results ("drylabbing") are serious acts of intellectual dishonesty, as is claiming undue credit for another's work or ideas. The Research Misconduct policy is applicable to all researchers, including undergraduate students.

III. Papers and Reports

Students are also required to produce reports and research papers during their careers at Caltech. In collecting data and information, as well as in writing, students must actively avoid plagiarizing the work of others. Proper footnoting of source material and documentation of borrowed ideas is absolutely essential. Many professors are willing to show students how to use proper citation practices.

Plagiarism, whether inadvertent paraphrasing or direct substitution, takes unfair advantage of any original authors, the instructor who incorrectly believes that the ideas are the plagiarist's, and other students who correctly footnote all sources. The Hixon Writing Center is a good source of information on how to avoid plagiarism.

All incoming freshmen are required to take the online summer training module "Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism" and will be held accountable for complying with its rules and instructions. The training is available to all students on the Hixon Writing Center website.

IV. Library Usage

The operation of all Institute libraries is governed by the Honor System. At Caltech, students are not subjected to having their backpacks and briefcases checked before leaving the library. This freedom has been maintained because the students respect the library rules and feel bound by the Honor System to do so. It is the student's responsibility to see to it that they are aware of all the rules applying to any library material used. Further information regarding the library's policies can be found on the library's website.

A person who keeps a three-hour reserve book for longer than the specified time takes advantage of others who need the book, particularly at critical times such as before a test. Anyone who removes a book without intending to return it, or who mutilates or defaces a book, is stealing from every library user in the community. Some students may also intend to return books but do not bother to check them out. Such students ignore the possibility that the library might decide the book is lost and replace it. It is also the case that another student might badly need a book and want to contact the person who took it, and the library would thus be unable to locate the borrower.

V. Practical Jokes and Pranks

Pranks have long been a part of undergraduate life at Caltech. When planned with consideration for the rest of the community, they can be very enjoyable. However, badly thought out pranks can take unfair advantage of someone in the community. All pranks must be cleared by the Office of Residential Experience.

When executing a prank, always keep in mind a number of issues. Will the receiver(s) of the joke think of it as humorous, or will they be upset? Will the joke possibly cause the destruction of property or the invasion of privacy? Could the prank cause a curtailment of student rights and privileges? Could it injure someone? Could it damage the position of the Institute, or cost the Institute money for reparations?

VI. Traditions

House traditions and Ditch Day Stacks are valuable parts of student life. When acting as a part of a group, always ask yourself the same questions that are relevant to pranks: Will this be fun for the participants, or upsetting? Will this destroy someone else's property, or invade someone's privacy? Could this cause harm to other members of the community, even those who are not directly involved?

When planning a stack or tradition-related event, always keep others in mind. Check your plans against Caltech's hazing policy and other relevant policies, consult with your RAs and RLC, and remember that those involved may react in unforeseen ways. (See the section on Laws and Institute Rules.) All Ditch Day Stacks must be cleared by the Office of Residential Experience.

VII. Computer Usage

The use of computer resources is governed by the Honor System and the Institute's Policy on Acceptable Use of Electronic Resources. Theft, damage (even minor damage, such as spilling water into a keyboard), or misuse of the equipment takes advantage of all the other users who will lose the use of the resources.

Use of computer accounts is also governed by the Honor System. Damaging system files or gaining unauthorized access to another user's files places other users at a disadvantage. Having the ability to gain access to another user's files does not imply having their permission to do so. Please review the information about file sharing software here: https://www.ogc.caltech.edu/forms/dmca.

Many computers on campus have policies designed to fairly allocate system resources (such as system disk space, memory, printers, modem lines) and prevent unintentional damage to the system. Circumventing these policies may place other users at a disadvantage.

Because of the advances of networking it is very easy to communicate with other users on the computer system in a variety of ways. As with any interpersonal communications, it is important to think about how you are interacting with the person and whether you are using the computer to harass or victimize them, which, in addition to potentially being illegal, would be a serious violation of the Honor System as well as other Caltech policies.

Breaking into computers at remote sites could have serious repercussions for Caltech as an institute and could result in a serious reduction of some of the network computer resources available to us. Moreover, it is obviously illegal and a serious violation of the Honor System as well as other Caltech policies.

VIII. Companies Unaffiliated with Caltech

One might think that it is impossible for a Caltech student to transgress the Honor System while interacting with someone outside the community. However, this is not true if that person or organization offers a service to the community that might be jeopardized by the student's actions. The behavior may also constitute a policy violation or be illegal.

IX. Interpersonal Relations

Violations of the Honor System do not always involve material or tangible advantages. Clear examples of this are discrimination and invasion of another's privacy. Actions which degrade an individual or group, promulgate damaging rumors, or place someone in a situation where they feel threatened, harassed, or victimized may also unfairly disadvantage members of the community.

In order to create a healthy living and studying environment for everyone, it is important to be aware of the effects one's actions would likely have on others.

X. Nondiscrimination & Equal Opportunity, Unlawful Harassment and Sexual and Gender-Based Discrimination and Harassment and Sexual Misconduct

As described in the previous section, if a student's actions place someone else in a situation where they feel threatened, harassed, or victimized, the student may be placing them at a disadvantage, and their conduct may also be a violation of the Nondiscrimination & Equal Opportunity policy, the Unlawful Harassment Policy and/or the Gender-Based Misconduct policy. Neither the Board of Control nor the Conduct Review Committee handles cases involving discrimination and equity issues, unlawful harassment or sexual misconduct. For more information and help please visit the website of the Equity office and Title IX.

XI. Research Misconduct

Caltech's Policy on Research Misconduct is applicable to all Caltech researchers. Research misconduct is defined as fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results.

- Fabrication means making up data or results, and recording or reporting them.
- Falsification means manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.
- Plagiarism means the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results or words without giving appropriate credit.

Research misconduct does not include honest error or honest differences in interpretations or judgments of data.

For more information, visit the Office of Research Compliance website.

Enforcing the Honor System

When students fail to follow the Honor System or violate Institute policy, measures must be taken to protect our community from their actions. The Deans, the Board of Control (BoC or Board) and the Conduct Review Committee (CRC) enforce the Honor System and/or Institute policy. Academic violations of the Honor Code are investigated by the BoC and decided by the Dean. Non-academic violations of the Honor Code and policy violations not involving sexual misconduct or discrimination are reviewed by the Dean's office or the CRC and decided by the

Deans' office. The Deans, at their discretion, may decide to directly handle a matter, and will do so consistent with the Involuntary Leave policy. In other instances, the "Routing Group" will determine whether a particular matter should be sent to the CRC or to the Deans. The Routing Group is comprised of the Dean of Students, the Associate Deans of Students, the AVP for Student Affairs and Residential Experience, the chair of the Board of Control, and the student co-chair of the CRC.

I. Reporting Suspected Violations

Every student shares responsibility for upholding the Honor System and Caltech policy. This is indeed a heavy obligation. It implies not only refraining from actions that may be violations but also protecting our community from any who engage in such activities.

Unfortunately, this duty can cause a conflict of responsibility or divided loyalty, especially if you have seen a violation or strongly suspect that one has been committed. You are placed in the difficult situation of weighing your obligation to the community against your concern for the violator. You might be tempted to warn the suspected violator of the seriousness of their acts, thinking this to be a satisfactory solution to the dilemma. However, the suspected violator may be able to convince you that no violation has occurred when one might have been. If you suggest that the person turn themselves in, you really have no way of verifying, nor are you likely to know if the questionable action is repeated.

If you are concerned that a possible Honor System violation may have occurred, but find it difficult to report the situation, please keep in mind that the primary goal when dealing with students who have committed Honor System violations is always to bring the violator to a place where they can understand and live under the Honor System effectively. The decisions of the Deans, the BoC and the CRC are motivated by concern for the respondent as well as for the community as a whole. Reporting suspected violations is one of the most difficult areas of the Honor System for most students; however, it is also one of the most important aspects of the Honor System.

In light of this, the Deans, the BoC and the CRC have taken the position that it is the responsibility of every student to protect the community and the Honor System. A conscious failure to report suspected violations may itself be considered an Honor System violation.

If you suspect that a violation has been committed, but are unsure what to do, talk with your house Board representative, to any other member of the BoC, to a Dean, or a member of the Routing Group. The Chair and Secretaries of the BoC can always be reached at boc@caltech.edu. The Dean of Students can be reached at campus extension x6351, and the Routing Group can be reached through the Dean or by email at routing@caltech.edu for non-academic violations.

In all cases, consider your personal responsibility to the Caltech community, of which you are a vital part. It is far better to report a strong suspicion than to allow a potential violation to grow and compound.

II. Board of Control

The purpose, composition, duties, and procedures of the Board, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the Deans, faculty, Vice President of Student Affairs, complainants (students reporting suspected violations), respondents (those against whom an allegation of an academic Honor System violation is made), witnesses, and other participants in the process, are set forth in Article XIII of the Associated Students of the California Institute of Technology bylaws.

The Board investigates the allegations of academic Honor Code violations by interviewing the respondent and any witnesses, and assessing the relevant evidence, and votes on recommendations to the Dean about whether or not an Honor Code violation has been committed and its scope (conviction/dismissal), how to nullify the unfair advantage gained (nullification), and how to uphold the Honor Code and protect the Caltech community from future violations (protection). The Dean makes the decisions after considering the Board's case report and any objections and further evidence raised by the respondent. For cases involving a class, the class instructor will be informed of the outcome, even if no grade change is required.

Students should be aware that their faculty instructors and TAs play an important role in upholding the Honor Code. Students can work with them to prevent Honor Code violations by getting timely help on difficult concepts and assignments, clarifications on the limits of collaboration policies, and extensions or other assistance to mitigate workload stress. Students should be aware that faculty and TAs report the majority of allegations of academic Honor Code violations received by the BoC. It is better to use faculty and TAs proactively to prevent circumstances that can lead to violations. Retaliation by or against anyone involved in the process is strictly prohibited and will be treated as a separate violation of the Honor Code.

1. Conviction/Dismissal

Whether there is sufficient evidence to show that an Honor Code violation took place and its scope is the first recommendation voted on by the Full Board. Before voting, the Full Board assesses all of the relevant evidence, including statements by the respondent and witnesses during the hearing and any documentary evidence. During the hearing, the respondent and witnesses will be asked to explain any circumstances concerning the event or action in question. This may include, for example, such information as where and when a particular homework set or exam was completed, what references were used, and what actions were observed. A respondent may also need to explain their reasoning and thought processes on certain problems.

It is very important for a respondent to realize that it is in their best interests to tell the truth, even if they decide to tell the truth somewhat later in the process, and thus contradict earlier information they provided. Honesty is considered favorably by the BoC in voting on its protection recommendation. Witnesses must also be honest and should be aware that since they will not be informed of all details of a case, they should not judge and withhold as irrelevant any information asked for by the BoC.

2. Nullification of Unfair Advantage

The second recommendation the Full Board votes on is nullification, or how to remove the unfair advantage gained by the respondent. This is where the Full Board officially quantifies the

scope of the effect of the violation. The scope of the credit the Full Board votes to remove will correspond to the Full Board's assessment of the scope of the unfair advantage gained. For example, in a case where a respondent had access to all of the solutions for a problem set but copied only one solution, the Full Board may still recommend nullification of all the whole problem set since the respondent would have been able to check and verify all of their work. However, if the Full Board determines that a respondent's advantage was confined to only portions of an assignment, the Full Board may vote to nullify only those portions. Therefore, nullification is assessed on a case by case basis.

3. Protection of the Community

After deciding on the measures necessary to nullify the unfair advantage, the Board will decide if measures to protect the community from further Honor Code violations are necessary and what these might be. The Board determines its protection recommendation by considering any factors it considers relevant, including the severity of the violation, the respondent's honesty during the process, and prior convictions. The Full Board is made aware of prior convictions only after it has voted on the conviction and nullification recommendations, so that these two votes are not influenced by prior convictions.

The protection recommendation, as its name indicates, is not meant to be punitive. Rather, it reflects the Board's assessment of the degree to which the respondent's past and present violations indicate a need to take steps to improve the respondent's understanding of the Honor Code and protect the Caltech community from future violations. The Board can recommend any number of protection options, but typically requires that a respondent have one or more discussions with members of the Board about the Honor System. This is often done when the BoC feels that the respondent does not understand certain aspects of the Honor System.

The most serious recommendation the Board can make is to place a student on leave for one or more terms, or even permanently.

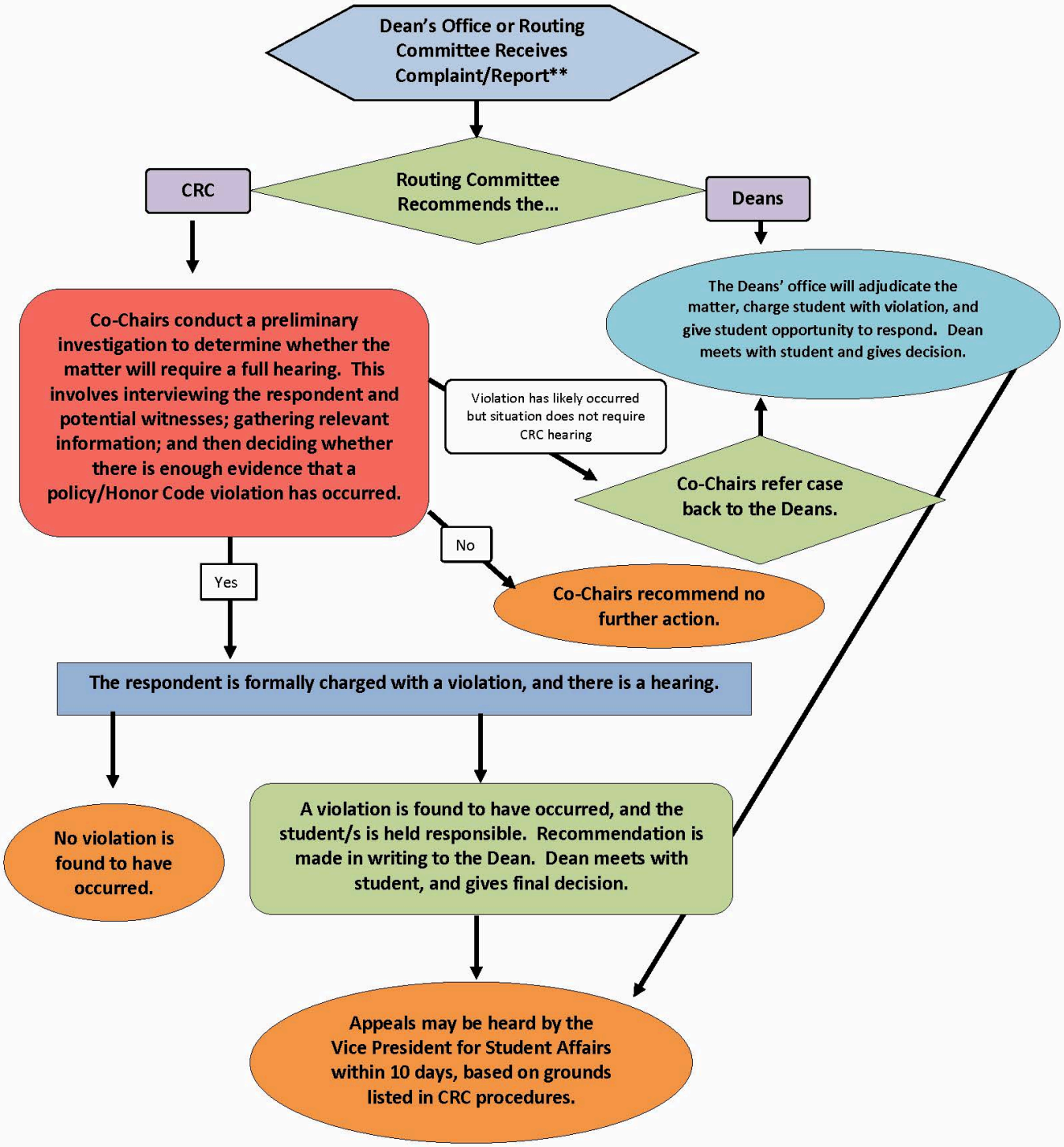
III. Conduct Review Committee

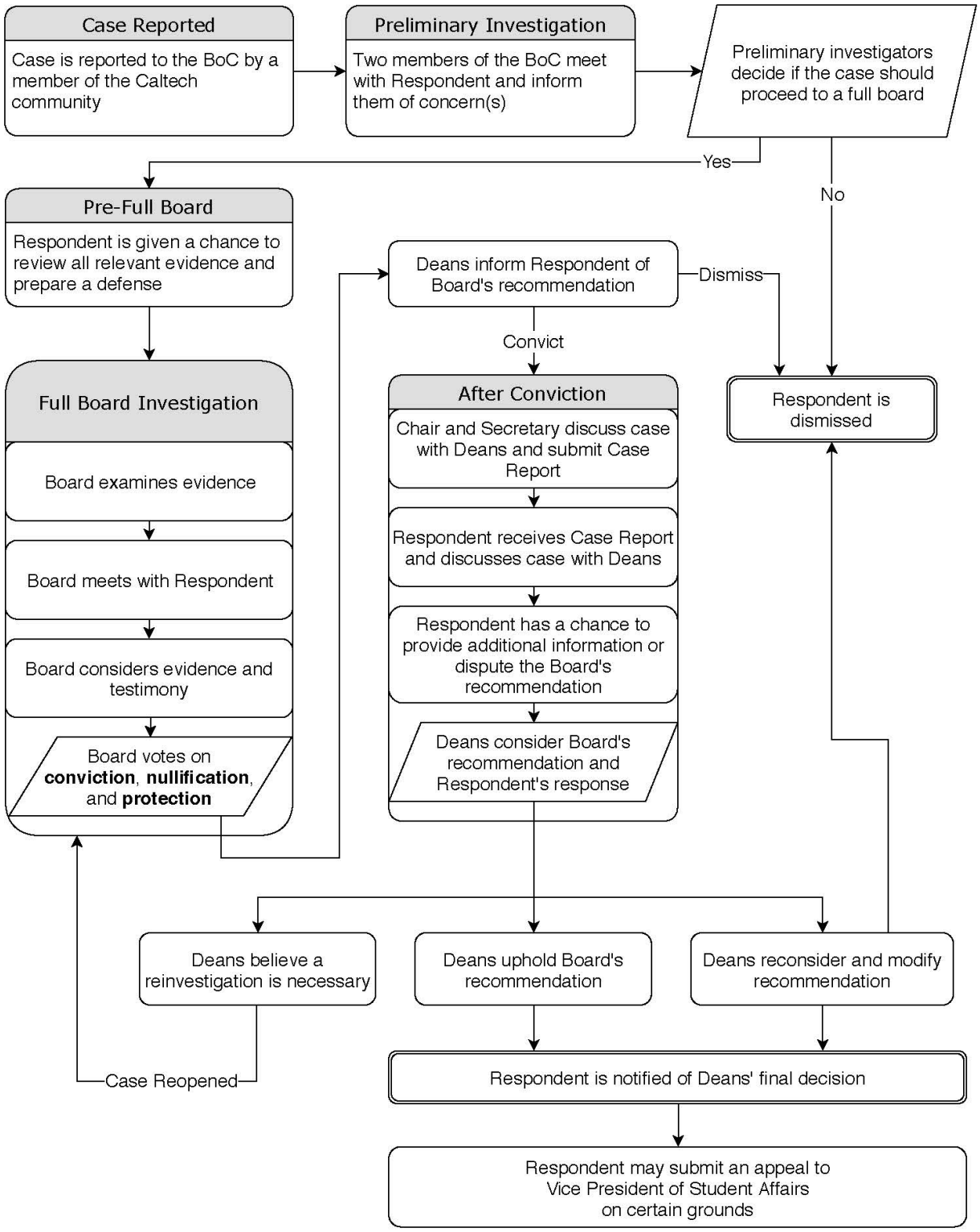
The CRC, a committee of undergraduates, faculty, and staff, is co-chaired by an Associate Dean of Students and a student elected by the student body.

The CRC handles a wide range of non-academic misconduct, and because it may deal with widely known incidents or situations involving groups of people, it may at times be forced to operate more publicly than the Board of Control. If the outcome of a case could potentially affect many students, it would be difficult to come to an appropriate decision while maintaining confidentiality.

The Conduct Review Committee seeks to make decisions in the best interest of the entire Caltech community and therefore several constituencies are represented and jointly make recommendations that account for the concerns of professors, students, and staff. Like the Board of Control, the CRC makes recommendations to the Dean of Undergraduate Students who makes the pertinent decisions. The purpose, composition, and duties of the CRC are set forth in Article XIV of the Associated Students of the California Institute of Technology bylaws.

Flow Diagram for Non-Academic Honor Code or Policy Violations*



*Any case that involves unlawful harassment or sexual violence will be managed according to Institute policy, and will not follow these processes. **According to their discretion, deans may also decide to directly handle a matter.

Board of Control Investigation Flowchart