Character Development During the College Years: Why It’s Crucial and How It Can Be Fostered

A Position Paper of the Character Education Partnership (CEP)

Executive Summary:
America’s system of higher education is regarded by many as the world’s best in academics. Our colleges and universities should strive equally hard to set the gold standard for character development. This position paper makes the case for intentional college-level character development as the most promising way to achieve that goal. The paper cites examples of higher education institutions that are currently taking deliberate steps to prepare their graduates not only to flourish in the workplace but also to contribute effectively as ethical citizens of their communities, nation, and world.

For nearly two decades, CEP has helped K-12 schools implement comprehensive character education in classrooms, schools, and districts. However, the character development journey does not end with a high school diploma. The college years must foster a higher level of intellectual and moral maturity, a deeper commitment to the pursuit of excellence and ethical behavior in every area of one’s life. We therefore call upon all of America’s institutions of higher education—colleges, universities, community colleges, and post-secondary vocational schools—to take up the challenge of educating citizens of character.

*Nothing is more important for the public weal than to form and train youth in wisdom and virtue.*

—Benjamin Franklin
Character Development During the College Years

Regardless of whether a college student has a high or low level of commitment to living an honorable life, colleges and universities have a critical responsibility to introduce and strengthen the values and ideals indispensable to our democratic society and increasingly interdependent world. In his landmark study, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America, Ernest Boyer eloquently argued that the heart of a higher education is not the cultivation of skills or the learning of certain branches of knowledge, but rather the formation of values and character.

Technical skill of whatever kind leaves open essential questions: Education for what purpose? Competence to what end? At a time in life when values should be shaped and personal priorities sharply probed, what a tragedy it would be if the most deeply felt issues, the most haunting questions, the most creative moments were pushed to the fringes of institutional life. What a monumental mistake it would be if students, during the undergraduate years, remained trapped within the organizational grooves and narrow routines to which the academic world sometimes seems excessively devoted.

Boyer’s words remind us that education, in its fullest sense, is a moral enterprise—a continuous and intentional effort to help guide students to know and pursue what is good, just, and worthwhile. In their book, Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility, researchers Anne Colby and Thomas Ehrlich point out that, unfortunately, many colleges and universities avoid tackling the task of character development in a direct and deliberate way. Instead, such institutions “hope and expect that these outcomes [ethical responsibility to self and others] will be achieved as by-products of a college education.” However, the above-cited research showing growing self-centeredness among college students is proof that positive character outcomes are not the guaranteed by-products of a college education.

Similarly, K-12 educators know from experience that the failure to implement character education in an intentional, systematic, and comprehensive way often leads to disappointing outcomes. At all developmental levels, educating students who are smart and good is too important to be left to chance.
Character Development and Institutional Mission

CEP has consistently rejected a “one-size-fits-all” approach to K-12 character development. We recognize that there are many ways to implement our Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education.6 We believe that what works best in any given higher education context will also vary significantly, partly because of the diversity of missions. Public institutions may emphasize dimensions of character and experiences, such as service learning, that help to shape an ethical and engaged democratic citizenry. Religiously-affiliated schools may do that as well while adding other character goals that are informed by their particular faith traditions. Other institutions may choose to focus, at least initially, on a significant campus problem, such as academic dishonesty or acts of intolerance or racism.

The first essential step, then, is to reach consensus on which principles, values, and character strengths the educational institution will affirm and reinforce based on its particular mission and culture. At the K-12 level, we have found that the most effective school-based character efforts receive broad support from all stakeholders (educators, parents, community and business leaders, and the students themselves). Widespread agreement on core values and goals is likely to be equally important at the college level.

LESSON 1: Leadership matters.

In K-12 schools, the priorities of the principal become the priorities of the staff. Find a school that has achieved character education excellence, and you will nearly always find a principal leading the way. In colleges and universities, the leadership of the president is vital.

In “The Teaching of Ethics in the American Undergraduate Curriculum, 1876-1976,” the historian Douglas Sloan points out that in the early days of higher education, “the most important course in the college curriculum was moral philosophy, taught usually by the college president and required of all senior students.”7 This course aimed to pull together, and give meaning and purpose to, the students’ entire college experience. Its aim was to equip graduating students with the ethical sensitivity needed to use their newly acquired knowledge in ways that would benefit not only themselves but also the larger society.

A Call to Action and Five Key Lessons

A central goal of this position paper is to encourage college communities to reflect upon the breadth of their institutional missions and inspire a wider commitment to intentional character development during the college years. In calling upon every institution of higher education to commit to this goal, we wish to share five lessons learned from CEP’s two decades of experience with hundreds of schools across the country. We believe that using these lessons to guide the work of college-level character development will increase the likelihood of long-term integration, effectiveness, and sustainability. These five lessons are: (1) Leadership matters; (2) Success requires a comprehensive approach; (3) Students must be engaged in their own character development; (4) Celebrate success; and (5) Schools must assess character development outcomes.

CAMPUS PROFILES

Morehouse College—Atlanta, Georgia

The mission statement of Morehouse College is “to develop men with disciplined minds who will lead lives of leadership and service.” Their President, Dr. Robert M. Franklin, has further proclaimed that “Morehouse College will provide intellectual and moral leadership in a 21st Century Global Renaissance of character, civility and community.” Morehouse and its leadership fully embrace the core belief of alumnus, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who rightly said, “We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.”

United States Air Force Academy—Colorado Springs, Colorado

The Air Force Academy’s Honor Code was adopted by the first graduating class. It states, “We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does.” Each year, the school hosts the “National Character and Leadership Symposium,” through which cadets can enhance their understanding of living honorably and of how character is inseparably linked to leadership. The Academy is also building a new Center for Character and Leadership Development. Following the leadership and standard set by the Academy, the broader United States Air Force established service-wide core values for their hundreds of thousands of men and women stationed across the world: “Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.”
The college president was not alone in placing this kind of emphasis on character. Historians have repeatedly reminded us that noble virtues and character strengths were the very foundations of early higher education in the United States. Even today, important values such as truthfulness, honor, civic duty, and personal responsibility remain at the core of many institutional mission statements.

The challenge of contemporary college and university presidents is to give voice to the mission of character development, keep it central, and help it live in the hearts and minds of faculty and students. Many college and university presidents currently do make this a high priority. Colleges That Encourage Character Development, a compendium of higher education character-building initiatives, begins by profiling the exemplary ethical leadership of college and university presidents in dozens of diverse institutions, large and small, public and private, secular and religious.

We urge all college and university presidents, and their trustees, to establish priorities and comprehensive programs that will prepare students for lives of personal and civic responsibility and ethical leadership. Leadership, of course, extends beyond the office of the president. We therefore also call on senior campus administrators—as part of their educational and civic obligation—to become champions of character development initiatives on their campuses.

A bold emphasis on character development among college and university leaders will set an example for the students of today who will be the leaders of tomorrow. A college education that helps students maximize their potential by developing their moral and performance character—including qualities such as integrity, social responsibility, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities—will help many rise to the highest levels of their chosen professions.

**LESSON 2: Success requires a comprehensive approach.**

CEP has learned from its K-12 work that schools with the most effective character development initiatives make a comprehensive commitment to this effort, one that pervades every phase of school life. At the college and university level, such a commitment will involve creating strong and inspiring campus-wide moral tenets that articulate the expectation of personal and civic responsibility in all dimensions of college life—from the academic program to athletic events and other student activities, residence hall life, the intellectual and moral climate of the campus, and interactions with the surrounding community.

We applaud efforts in recent years to incorporate “ethics across the curriculum.” We also encourage colleges and universities to go beyond this approach to adopt or adapt other successful practices, or even to create groundbreaking new approaches that integrate character throughout the entire undergraduate experience. We must develop students’ ability to make ethical decisions, but also give them many opportunities for ethical action that enable them to test and refine their decision-making capacities. A deep immersion in guided activities such as reflective service learning, for example, can foster the virtue of acting generously for others.

In K-12 contexts, the quality of students’ relationships with teachers and other adults is central to their character development. At the college level, students’ relationships with faculty remain highly influential. Many colleges and universities have a
“students first” philosophy that encourages faculty to be accessible to and supportive of students and to make excellence in teaching a high priority. Many institutions promote this focus on students' learning and whole-person development though appropriate professional development for faculties.

Central to the emphasis on individual ethical development should be a focus on the common good. Students need to reflect on what the common good is, their responsibility to promote the common good, and how they will improve the common good in their adult lives. The curriculum can be a rich way to explore the challenges and opportunities of enhancing the lives of others both close to home and globally. Moreover, we urge colleges and universities to pursue a more comprehensive approach to character development by considering questions such as:

- Has the university provided sufficient resources to catalyze its character development initiative?
- Does the president or chancellor speak regularly on the importance of developing character strengths in students?
- Is the college or university serious about reducing academic dishonesty, and is that reflected in its policies and enforcement?
- How does the institution address dangerous behaviors such as binge drinking?
- Does the administration actively encourage the acceptance of others?
- Does it integrate principles of character development into sports?
- Does it promote the development of a noble and socially responsible sense of purpose in students?

**Lesson 3: Students must be engaged in their own character development.**

CEP’s *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* have guided hundreds of schools in their character development efforts. We believe these principles have broad applicability across developmental levels. Although college-level character development will look different in many ways from character-building in K-12 schools, the Eleven Principles can easily be adapted as a framework for leaders of post-secondary efforts. These principles include, for example, identifying and reinforcing core values, creating a caring campus community and sub-communities (e.g., dormitories), providing college students with opportunities for moral action, and fostering their self-motivation.10

Fostering students’ self-motivation and personal responsibility for their own character development takes on even greater importance in the college years. This is a time when students can be encouraged to develop a philosophy of life that engages life’s largest questions: What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of my life? What leads to authentic happiness?
What goals are worth pursuing? What sort of person do I want to be?

Reflecting on her experience teaching ethics to college students, Christina Hoff Sommers says that many students come to her course as “dogmatic relativists” who think that morality is just a matter of personal opinion rather than a matter of universal obligation. One effective antidote to such relativism, she says, is studying the virtues—what Aristotle, for example, says about courage, wisdom, justice, and temperance—and considering the relevance of these virtues to their own lives. Sommers writes: “Once the student becomes engaged with the problem of what kind of person to be, and how to become that kind of person, the problems of ethics become concrete and practical. Morality itself is thereafter looked on as a natural and even inescapable personal undertaking.”

At all educational levels, but especially at the college level, we should strive to inspire students to take charge of their character development, understand how their daily choices shape their character, and explore their inner beliefs and desires regarding the sort of human being they want to be, even when no one is looking. We want them to view their character development as a personal mission and lifelong responsibility that they take on intentionally and conscientiously.

Over time, personal growth can become the norm of a campus culture when students realize that everyone around them is engaged in this effort to cultivate and act upon their ideals and principles. We therefore encourage all colleges and universities to implement approaches by which students actively engage in their own character development.

**LESSON 4: Celebrate success.**

Over the years, CEP has also learned the importance of celebrating success. Each year, we have sought to celebrate character education successes through our National Schools of Character program and publication honoring schools that have implemented our 11 principles in exemplary ways.
We encourage colleges and universities to similarly highlight the people and initiatives that are advancing college-level character development—celebrating and communicating their successes nationally as well as at the campus level. (Our Campus Profiles in this paper are done in that spirit.) “Short-term wins” boost credibility and broaden support. People are more willing to join the effort when they can see concrete evidence that the journey is producing results.

**LESSON 5: Assess outcomes.**

What gets measured, matters. We have learned that K-12 character education becomes a higher priority when there are hard data—such as declining discipline problems or improving test scores—that show tangible progress to back up the claim of “success.”

For this reason, higher education institutions must establish measurable outcomes for character development and the means of assessing progress. Each institution’s set of outcomes will differ to some degree according to its resources and vision. But all colleges and universities would do well to create a process by which advancement toward their outcomes can be rigorously measured and the results communicated to key campus stakeholders.

### Conclusion

Recent research suggests that employers are seeking college graduates who are honest and have a strong work ethic. Studies showing high levels of cheating and poor work habits among college students indicate that there is still plenty of room for growth in these important areas. Beyond those basic traits, colleges and universities must also strive to graduate students with a sense of compassion and justice, including the commitment to address the social structures that create and maintain injustices such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression.

A person of character does the right thing because he or she has established a set of deeply-rooted commitments that motivate every action and decision—to such an extent that it would be unnatural to act contrary to those beliefs. The philosopher Charles Taylor explains the significance of these commitments: “To know who I am…is a species of knowing where I stand.” Our commitments—to do our work well, be our best selves in every relationship, and contribute positively to world around us—define our moral self-identity. These commitments cut to the core of who we are as individuals and as a society.

Higher education can be viewed as a unique character development laboratory where young people are inspired and encouraged to examine, practice, and reflect on the kind of people they want to become. America’s colleges and universities should recognize the distinct nature of their ability to nurture students who not only rank among the world’s brightest scholars, but who also can become the world’s most compassionate, honest, and socially responsible citizens. The quality of our personal and collective lives in the century ahead depends on how seriously we all commit ourselves to developing good character in college students.

**CAMPUS PROFILE**

**Alverno College—Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

Since 1976, Alverno has been conducting ongoing research on student learning outcomes. “Valuing in decision-making” is one of eight faculty-identified liberal education outcomes in which all students must demonstrate proficiency before graduation. It is defined as a process whereby a student examines her values, interprets the source of them, considers the relationship between her values and actions, practices taking multiple perspectives, and ultimately contributes to the development of values in the broader community. The school was recently recognized by the Dalton Institute for College Student Values for its groundbreaking work in establishing rigorous, comprehensive, and measurable student learning outcomes.
A Sampling of National Organizations That Promote Character Development During the College Years

Center for Academic Integrity
www.academicintegrity.org
Since 1992, the Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) has provided a forum to identify, affirm, and promote the values of academic integrity among college students, faculty and administrators. CAI defines academic integrity as a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. From these values flow principles of behavior that enable academic communities to translate ideals to action.

Campus Compact
www.compact.org
Founded in 1985 by the presidents of Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities and the president of the Education Commission of the States, Campus Compact is a national coalition of more than 1,100 college and university presidents — representing some 6 million students — who are committed to fulfilling the civic purpose of higher education. Campus Compact is the only national higher education association dedicated solely to campus-based civic engagement.

Dalton Institute on College Student Values
www.studentvalues.fsu.edu
The Dalton Institute conducts an annual conference for college faculty and administrators interested in character development during the college years. They also publish the Journal of College and Character.

Journal of College and Character
www.collegevalues.org
Journal of College and Character is a professional, peer-reviewed publication that focuses on how colleges and universities influence the moral and civic learning and behavior of their students. The journal includes resources and information designed to encourage discussion, research, and innovative educational practices, publishing scholarly articles and applied research on issues related to ethics, values, and character development in higher education.

National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs
www.nclp.umd.edu
Based at the University of Maryland, NCLP supports leadership development in college students by serving as a central source of professional development for leadership educators. NCLP develops cutting edge resources, provides a forum for information sharing, and hosts professional development symposia for faculty members, student affairs professionals, and other educators involved with promoting student leadership education.

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