Increasingly, educators at colleges and universities are recognizing the importance of educating for that elusive thing called character. But their efforts are often piecemeal—a service learning program here, a residential contract there. Here's what a comprehensive approach to character education might look like.

Character education is a hot topic, widely discussed in academic, political, and lay arenas. The tragic murders at Columbine High School merely underscore what most educators already recognize, that our schools are not adequately serving the moral development needs of our society and citizens. Moreover, the efforts that are being undertaken are devoted mostly to elementary and secondary school character education, with relatively little attention paid to character on U.S. college campuses. The Character Education Partnership, the predominant advocacy organization for character education in the United States, for example, has chosen not to focus on postsecondary applications even though it supports such efforts in principle. This is not to say that nothing is being done at colleges and universities, but it is our contention that there is not enough attention paid to character development in this nation's institutions of higher learning—either on the part of campus educators or the general public.

There are many reasons for this. Many faculty are hesitant to influence student character, and students are often resistant to such attempts. Those in higher education often balk at what they may view as tampering with students' morality. To these objections we offer the

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following arguments for postsecondary character education. First, it is unavoidable. Education inevitably affects character, either intentionally or unintentionally. To abstain is merely to abdicate control to chance or other influences. Second, as most college educators are well aware, there are significant moral problems prevalent on college and university campuses—alcohol abuse, date rape, academic dishonesty, vandalism, and assault, to name a few. Finally, postsecondary education provides society one of its last large-scale opportunities to shape the character of tomorrow’s leaders.

**Defining Character and Character Education**

Character is a widely used but controversial concept. To arrive at a working definition of character development we have looked to a variety of sources. The Character Education Partnership defines character as “knowing, caring about and acting upon core ethical values such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others.” Developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind has defined character as the “ethical estimate of an individual” (p. 3); in other words, as the general assessment of an individual’s moral worth. In a chapter in *Moral Issues in Psychology*, one of the authors of this article, Marvin Berkowitz, has defined moral development as the growth of “an individual’s capacity to function as an effective moral agent” and has identified seven elements of moral functioning: behavior, values, personality, affect, reasoning, identity, and meta-moral characteristics. Our definition incorporates elements from all of these sources. We define character development as the growth of those aspects of the individual that represent his or her ethical worth, including behavior, cognition, affect, values, personality, identity, and skills that are not moral themselves but support moral functioning. Ultimately, to speak of a person’s character is to speak of that person’s goodness, in both a global sense and a differentiated psychological sense.

How institutions translate this definition into character education will depend largely on their institutional values and missions. Public colleges and universities, for example, may highlight aspects of character that shape a democratic citizenry. Religion-based institutions will likely have conceptions of character informed by their particular faith traditions. Other institutions may shape this education around a response to a specific campus incident, such as academic dishonesty or racism. At military academies the vision of character education focuses on particular military virtues along with traditional civic virtues. The form that any character education initiative takes must be directly related to the outcomes the institution hopes to achieve. The more comprehensive those outcomes, the more the initiative should be diverse, multifaceted, and systemic. As a result, institutions that want to engage in truly comprehensive character education must put in place a wide array of elements and implement them throughout the educational environment. Whatever specific objectives or aspects of character that institutions decide to emphasize, it is essential that character education be understood as a pervasive, multifaceted, institutional endeavor based on a clear vision of the moral person and core values.

The United States Air Force Academy is a fine example of an institution that is putting a comprehensive character education program into action. For this reason, we describe that program in detail. USAFA has a clearly stated character mission (indeed, character is one of its four educational pillars, along with academics, athletics, and military training), and it has identified three core objectives for character education, striving to instill forthright integrity, service before self, and excellence in all one does. Students (cadets) are exposed to and trained in character from the day they set foot on the campus. They cover an extensive set of required lessons on honor and human relations. They are trained in character explicitly and implicitly in all their spheres of experience at the academy: military training, academic curriculum, leadership training, athletic participation, chaplaincy, volunteerism, and so forth. In 1993, USAFA established the Center for Character Development to facilitate character development programs and activities throughout all aspects of the Academy experience.” The center has four divisions, with over twenty full-time
staff. The Honor Division oversees the honor system. The Human Relations Division works to foster an environment and develop programs that encourage cadets to treat everyone with respect and dignity. The Character and Ethics Division organizes special programs, staff training, conferences, mentoring, volunteer work, and adventure-based learning activities to facilitate character development. The Curriculum and Research Division oversees all USAFA character and ethics curricula, attempting to integrate and systematize them across the campus. It also develops new character curricula and training methods. The center also has a staff person assigned to research and an endowed visiting chair in character development. Many of the programs and structures of the USAFA character program are described later in more detail as examples of particular elements of postsecondary character education.

HOW TO FOSTER CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

IN THIS SECTION we present the critical elements of an institution-wide character education initiative aimed at promoting comprehensive character development in college students. The initiative elements are modular and could be adopted piecemeal. The five critical ingredients in effective college-based character education are teaching about character; displaying character; demanding character; apprenticeship, or practicing character; and reflecting on character (see the outline in the sidebar).

Teaching About Character. One of the basic elements of good character is knowing what is right or wrong. Indeed, colleges and universities are expert at teaching about subjects, and so in many ways this method of character education should fit easily into their identities and missions. One example of the kind of program that seeks to teach about right and wrong and that some campuses are now trying out is called ethics across the curriculum. Such programs tend either to enlist the aid of philosophers in teaching or team teaching courses outside the Philosophy Department—for example, a philosopher might teach a business course in ethics—or to train faculty to incorporate ethics into traditional courses—as was done at Marquette University with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (as reported in two books edited by Robert Ashmore and William Starr). Institutions often assume that such initiatives are relevant only to a limited set of academic disciplines; however, creative academics have generated applications to the physical sciences, mathematics, and the like. Recently, members of the chemistry department at USAFA received the General Wakin Award for excellence in character education for their ethics across the curriculum initiative.

A less academic means of teaching about character is exhorting or espousing it. This is more common at the primary and secondary school level than at the postsecondary level. Still, there has been increased interest in this approach among scholars and educators, as evidenced by the formation of the Maxims Research Project, a character education funding program at the Templeton Foundation. Of course military institutions such as USAFA have long relied on this tactic. Slogans, quotations, and maxims about desirable character traits and moral issues are prominently displayed at such institutions. Many institutions of higher education incorporate the same kind of language into their mission statements and may find that the simple act of disseminating these statements and making the language more prominent on campus will help support character education.

Five Elements of Postsecondary Character Education

1. Teaching about character (morality, ethics, and so forth)
   - Ethics across the curriculum
   - Espoused values
   - Guest speakers, symposia, and so forth
   - Publications

2. Displaying character
   - Role-modeling
   - Institutional policies and behavior

3. Demanding character
   - Academic standards
   - Behavior standards
   - Enforcement policies and behavior

4. Apprenticeship, or practicing character
   - Democratic governance
   - Community service
   - Experiential learning

5. Reflecting on character
   - Service learning
   - Mentors
   - Journals
   - Topical discussions
Teaching about character may also be accomplished through other traditional academic venues, such as special programs (conferences, lecture series, department colloquia, and so forth) on topics important to character. Alternatively, university publications that reach students and those who work directly with them can highlight issues of character—for example, by publishing profiles of students who have manifested exemplary character.

Of course, these approaches rely on a rather mechanical means of knowledge transfer and may not always produce the results desired. Recently, for example, James Giese found that simple knowledge about alcohol and its use by college students was related to higher levels of alcohol consumption and that less consumption came about through maturity in understanding the role of alcohol in one’s life. This fits with what developmental stage models tell us about learning—that what is important is not what the individual knows but how the individual understands. Hence we must be cautious in extolling the virtue of simply accumulating facts about moral or character issues. Colleges and universities need also to nurture a mature understanding of character issues among students.

**Displaying Character.** Observing moral character in others is central to the development of one’s own character. Observing immorality fosters immorality, and observing hypocrisy, in the particular form of preaching good character but overtly practicing the opposite, also thwarts the objectives of character education. If a university or its subunit, let’s say the athletic program, espouses positive character goals but its coaches overtly practice incompatible behavior, such as pressuring course instructors to give unfair advantages to star athletes at risk of academic censure, then students are likely to become cynical, reject the legitimacy of the character message, and even engage in undesirable behavior. This hypocrisy is often evidenced on college campuses when substance abuse, particularly alcohol use, is an issue. For instance, the report *Preventing Alcohol-Related Problems on Campus: Substance-Free Residence Halls* suggests choosing residence assistants “who have already selected a substance-free lifestyle for themselves” (p. 13).

One of the most powerful factors in professional ethics training for medical students, for example, much more powerful than didactic lessons, is the observed behavior of senior faculty. Role-modeling by adults and peer leaders in the university environment needs to be ubiquitous, and these individuals need to understand the power of even their unreflective casual behaviors. Learning this information should be part of such individuals’ orientation and their ongoing professional training. As a way to emphasize the impact of leadership, role-modeling, and mentoring on the character development of its students, USAFA has instituted the Academy Character Enrichment Seminar (ACES), a one-day off-site seminar that introduces their roles in character development to staff, faculty, and student leaders. Attendees are exposed to issues, concepts, and experiences designed to convey the importance of character development and the role of academy personnel in modeling and supporting that process. Those working most closely with students receive priority attendance at ACES; however, the goal is that all members of the academy community will attend.

Recently, the cadets at USAFA have initiated a new tradition: selecting a role model for their class (for example, the members of the class of 2000 have selected General Jimmy Doolittle to symbolize good character for them while they are students at the academy, throughout their military careers, and beyond). An even more direct and ambitious means of highlighting exemplary role models is the USAFA Falcon Heritage Forum, a program designed to link students with distinguished military veterans’ wealth of experience and heritage. The forum allows systematic yet informal and intimate conversation over a period of days between cadets and individuals who have already demonstrated the values important to serving their community.

The university as an institution must also manifest good character. Students frequently point this out, often protesting immoral university policies. For example, some campuses exhort students not to abuse alcohol and then accept resources from beer manufacturers to sponsor high-profile events, even sometimes providing alcohol products and products with alcohol advertising at university events. Some institutions profess to emphasize academic values and achievement, but during student orientation and opening week activities and even some recruiting activities, they discuss only social events.
and issues. It is futile for a university to espouse good character if its policies and activities suggest its institutional character is lacking.

**Demanding Character.** Colleges and universities also need to demand good character. There are two components to this demand: setting clear and appropriate standards and implementing consistent and fair enforcement policies for those standards.

The U.S. military academies, as well as many civilian institutions, such as the Universities of Virginia and Maryland, University of Notre Dame, and Washington and Lee University, have established clear standards through their respective honor codes. For instance, the USAFA honor system requires all cadets to take an oath that “we will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does.” Often nonmilitary universities with honor codes or codes of conduct, however, do not adequately enforce these codes. Cases of cheating, for example, may ultimately be dismissed by university administrators when the institution is faced with the threat of a lawsuit. In such cases students quickly discern that the standards have no teeth and therefore need not be respected.

In contrast, the honor system at USAFA and the other U.S. service academies has an elaborate and fully and consistently implemented judicial system behind it. The honor code and system at the Air Force Academy are administered by cadets who both conduct investigations and convene judicial boards to determine violations of the code. The ultimate penalty for violating the code is disenrollment; however, a probationary period can be prescribed in cases where rehabilitation is thought possible. Probation normally involves a six-month period of honor education, counseling, journal keeping, and routine meetings with a mentor as well as punitive restrictions on activities, among other things.

Although we recognize that most colleges and universities may find many aspects of this honor system inappropriate for their campuses, it is a useful model for understanding the components an honor system requires to be optimally effective in promoting character development. An honor system must be anchored in a comprehensive, prescriptive conception of character. It must be fully implemented—that is, it must be widely publicized, offer an educational or training element, be enforced through a just judicial system and evenly applied sanctions, and so forth. It must also be owned and accepted by the students; they must perceive it as a fair and justifiable program. Other challenges that must be met for an effective honor system are adolescents’ reticence to report and convict their peers and their perception that authorities may without sufficient grounds override students’ judgments about those who have violated the honor code.

**Apprenticeship, or Practicing Character.** From a variety of perspectives it is clear that when students have opportunities to practice good character, their character development benefits. For example, democratic character can be promoted through participation in self-governance in student councils or residence halls. (For information on excellent self-governance models that are in place in the secondary schools and could be applied in higher education, consult *Preparing for Citizenship*, by Ralph Mosher and colleagues, and *Lawrence Kohlberg’s Approach to Moral Education*, by Clark Power and colleagues.)

A rapidly growing alternative means of institutionalizing good practice in character is through service learning programs, which have the potential not only to engage students in character-building and practicing activities but also to contribute to society and to integrate these student activities with the principal mission of the institution, academic learning. Forms of service activities that are not explicitly connected to academic learning are also prevalent at colleges and universities, and these too can be intentionally linked to character development.

Finally, there is a promising movement toward the use of experiential learning techniques to build character at universities and colleges. Experiential learning may take forms ranging from adventure-based learning in wilderness, athletic, or quasi-athletic settings, such as ropes courses, to learning through classroom exercises. Many of the outcomes of these programs, such as courage and cooperation, are important aspects of character development. Martin Hornyak, Alexandra Anna, and Daniel Miller have argued that experiential learning may be particularly effective with the generations that currently attend postsecondary institutions and with those that will follow. Programs such as Outward Bound...
have been capitalizing on the potential of experiential learning strategies for decades; however, the current generation of students may be especially receptive to such techniques.

**Reflecting on Character.** Reflecting is an important ingredient in the development of character in postsecondary education. Two methods of character education that we have discussed in previous sections—mentoring and service learning—can also offer excellent opportunities for reflecting. Mentors typically are the sounding boards for students’ overt presentations of their reflections on themselves and their actions, and service learning programs encourage reflection when they require students to write or speak about the meaning and impact of their activities and the effect on their personal growth.

Another means of promoting character-relevant reflection at colleges and universities is journal keeping. Students can be encouraged to keep journals through a variety of mechanisms. Writing classes often use journals as a means of promoting writing skills, and some institutions already require that students address matters of character in such writing. However, such journal keeping is typically not used intentionally for character development through self-reflection. Finally, colleges and universities can also foster reflection through formal academic programs that encourage topical discussions of issues relevant to character. Forums on contemporary ethical issues can also encourage student discussion.

If colleges and universities are to be serious about character development, they need to more systematically wed academic goals, such as literacy, with character education goals. As an example, the honor probation program at USAFA requires cadets on probation to keep a structured journal of their reflections on their honor violation and character and on their development during probation. The developmental and reformative effects of probation and the related journal keeping appear positive. Peer discussion of ethical issues is at the heart of most effective educational initiatives that promote the development of mature moral reasoning, a critical component of the mature moral agent. Colleges and universities need to understand this and reconceptualize many of their ongoing academic and student activity efforts as potential influences on character. Establishing a central office for character development, preferably one that spans both student affairs and academics, may be an effective means of doing so.

Postsecondary character education can be delivered piecemeal for specific narrow outcomes, but to be comprehensive it should include five basic strands: teaching about character, displaying character, demanding character, providing opportunities to practice character, and provide opportunities to reflect upon character. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these specific elements will be enhanced or diminished by the institution’s culture. Schools such as the College of the Ozarks or USAFA that make character a centerpiece of their identity and mission are likely to get more character output from their program input. An ethics audit of one’s institution, a self-study of character-promoting elements (or the lack thereof), and an identification of institutional impediments to effective character education are part of a comprehensive analysis of institutional culture. Each of the elements must be understood in its context if all of them are to be optimally effective. Only then will colleges and universities meaningfully address their obligation to educate the entire person.

**NOTES**


Finn, P. *Preventing Alcohol-Related Problems on Campus: Substance-Free Residence Halls.* Newton, Mass.: Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, 1996.


