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**The Impact of Character-based Education:  
Exploring the Effects of Curricular Redesign in  
Faith-based Higher Education**

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# The Impact of Character-based Education: Exploring the Effects of Curricular Redesign in Faith-based Higher Education

## Introduction

Three recent, notorious incidents provide evidence to pause and reflect on the state of character development in young people. In other words to ask the question, how are today's youth being formed so as to become civil members of society? The events in particular (the cheating scandal at Harvard (Berrett, 2012), the riots in London in the United Kingdom (Smith, 2011) and the theater shootings in Denver, CO (Cloud, 2012), are sadly by no means unique as there are precedents<sup>i</sup> for each of them. In fact they seem to reveal societal challenges related to a decline in virtue in general and virtuous behavior in particular. Further, they appear, on the face of it, to be linked to a factors associated with societal ills. This paper focuses on the role of character development in youth and young adults as a protective mechanism against risk. A case is made for the importance of interventions that promote positive character traits in college, i.e., academic integrity in the case of cheating; moral courage in the face of violence and destruction; and commitment to the common good in contrast to depriving others of life, freedom and property.

In seeking to understand the causes and contexts for the aforementioned injurious behaviors researchers have posited a number of risk factors that cumulatively raise an individual's chances for engaging in dishonest, violent and otherwise deleterious behavior. However, simply addressing the factors that put an individual at risk for such behavior fails to appreciate the role that environments play in buffering the effects of risk and even perhaps more importantly in offering an individual the ability to develop healthy habits that offer resistance to risk. As Kazdin (1987) commented in exploring risk and protective factors in youth, the inverse of risk is not simply the absence of risk but rather the presence of protective mechanisms. This suggests that reducing or removing risk factors from the environment is not enough to assist in the healthy, whole development of youth. Rather it is to admit that reducing risk is best accompanied by, for example, increasing or introducing protective features to the environment. Studies demonstrate that not only do such factors exist but they appear to have neurobiological correlates (Rappaport and Thomas, 2004). For example, when certain positive behaviors are introduced or certain positive states of mind are activated they not only tend to buffer the effects of risk but they also increase the likelihood of good decision making as mediated by neural cognitive pathways (Cushman and Young, 2009; McNamara and Burns, 2009). Thus, scholars have begun to investigate an array of social, neurocognitive and biological correlates to risk and perspective taking, avoidance of harm and empathic awareness, especially as these correlate with positive character traits and protective mechanisms (Burns & Dhindhwal-Harvey, 2012a; Burns & Dhindhwal-Harvey, 2012b; Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; McNamara & Burns, 2009; McNamara, Burns, Johnson & McCorkle, 2010). In addition, Van der Laan, Veenstra, Bogaerts, Verhulst & Ormel (2010) along with other scholars (Nesselrode, 1988) have found that there are a number of state – trait factors associated with healthy character development and the formation of positive personality features. These correlates have in the past been understood as elements related to good character, e.g., integrity, courage, social justice, responsibility, etcetera, (Peterson and Seligman,

2004). Likewise in the past these elements of good character have been encouraged and reciprocally re-enforced by both civil and religious authorities. Yet, as Arthur (2006) suggests, this can no longer be said to be the case. However, before exploring the role secular and religious institutions of higher learning can offer in promoting good character we review certain factors associated with positive character development in mid to late adolescents.

### **Character Development in Youth**

As suggested, character and virtue are frequently discussed topics, mainly when egregious behavior is displayed in public and especially in relation to the young. For example, in a search of the literature since 2001, character development was cited no less than 16,000 times, yet with a variety of different meanings and approaches reported. Our times have been declared to be in a state of crisis and decline in terms of morality and education (Kilpatrick, 1992; Lickona, 1996). Failure for developing character in the young is frequently aimed at families and, by extension, society in general for fostering a culture that promotes individual freedom but without personal responsibility. However, there is considerable debate as to who really is responsible and what mechanisms can be employed to address these issues (McLaughlin & Halstead, 1999). In fact, a variety of scholars have suggested that certain conditions exist (or must be encouraged) that, while fostering character development, will aid in a more just and civil world (Brooks & Kann, 1993; Lickona, 1996). However, the question of how to develop character remains not only challenged but challenging.

While not directly focusing on character development Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) ecological model of youth environment points to the essential role one's milieu plays in reducing risk and promoting protection. Included in Bronfenbrenner's nested model is the crucial role that schools and academic environments have in the lives of youth. In addition, Arthur, Davison, See, and Knowles (2010) along with others (Lickona, 1991) have explored a number of variables related to schools that appear linked to promoting youth character. While it is admitted that school is not the sole significant influence in the lives of youth it does play an influential role by highlighting the importance of fundamental character traits (Arthur, 2003). At the same time it is understood that it is neither education of itself nor the acquisition of knowledge in school alone that promote and shape the character of the student but rather character is formed in the academic medium through which the knowledge is imparted, i.e., how something is taught and who teaches it is as important as what is taught. In the best case scenario it would be parents and families that take on the role of the first and foremost educators of their children in the development of character. However, more and more teachers and schools have come into focus for the way in which they can take or are given the responsibility for developing formal social skills and for providing moral lessons for their students. Understanding the course that development takes in young adults is essential to understanding the role faculty can play promoting good character.

### **Trajectory of Character Development in Late Adolescence**

Late adolescence, considered by most theorists to span the years of 18 to 24, is a time of self-reflection, self-determination, and assessment of “aspirations and moral/ethical beliefs” (Levy-Warner, 1996, p. 27). During this period, a great deal of time is spent on important activities that are aimed at determining more clearly answers to the questions, “who they are?”, “what they are to become?” and “what their purpose is and will be?” As a result, they search for ways to determine to whom and to what they should commit themselves while routinely reflecting on the relative value of these commitments. This is not a process that they participate in alone. In a time marked by the consolidation of one’s identity and the move into more enduring relationships founded upon an understanding of intimacy (Erickson, 1968), adolescents frequently find that friends, colleagues and, for those who attend college, classmates and especially teachers can exert a significant degree of influence upon them. In fact “late-adolescents often seek out adults who are objects of their admiration” (p. 105) in order to navigate these unfamiliar territories whether on a cognitive (intellectual), social or psycho-emotional plane.

Early theorists of cognitive development (Piaget, 1960; Vygotsky, 1962) related the important role of teachers in developing the learner’s potential not only through guided experience but also through positive social interaction. Building on this, Tinsley and Lebak (2009) identified the “Zone of Reflective Capacity” to describe the way in which an adult’s capacity for reflection develops and grows as a result of collaboration around shared goals, which then further potentiates and expands the critical reflection process. Other scientists (Bandura, 1989) have demonstrated the important role of direct and vicarious modeling on the development of virtues (e.g., generosity) in youth. Further, Caine and Caine (1997) have demonstrated the way encouraging multiple conceptual processes broadens and enhances student learning when accompanied by nurturance, thereby resulting in more mature decision making. In all of these models, the importance of the role of teacher upon student remains clear and is understood as a dynamic, reciprocally influencing one (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

More recently, positive psychologists (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) have begun to define the notion of character as traits that are possessed by an individual and are stable over time, but can still be impacted by setting and thus are subject to change. They refined this definition by identifying character strengths, which they describe as, “the psychological processes or mechanisms that define the virtues” (p. 13). Aspects of this definition are shared, to varying degrees, by other scholars (Arthur, 2003; De Vries, 1998) who speak of the reciprocal effect of person variables (internal states) with environmental factors (including roles of family, peers and teachers, as well as educational setting and cultural contexts). However, we concur with Arthur’s definition which, while sharing aspects of the positive psychology approach, also includes spiritual and religious factors. In this sense, character development is understood as interrelated with values, virtues and conduct that guide decisions and behaviors relative to right and wrong (Arthur, 2003).

While most researchers of character development agree that the family is critical in this area, particularly parents, they also contend that educational communities play an essential and important function (Arthur, 2003; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Lickona, 1997). In fact, these researchers have determined a series of factors they believe are related to character

development in education. One consistent feature of these factors is the role that faculty assume in the academic environment.

### **Character Development in Higher Education**

Today, higher education emphasizes learning outcomes and focuses on the role of critical thinking, problem solving and attainment of knowledge. Faculty, it has been demonstrated, are a key to this equation of student learning outcomes (Beyer, Gillmore, and Fisher, 2007). Whether it is found in their teaching, their professional disposition, their standards for classroom activity and achievement, their personal relationship with students or their interaction with colleagues and parents, they have the ability to provide a rich, positive, intellectually engaging and academically rigorous environment that by its very nature influences student learning and value development. Moreover, Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) relate the critical significance of “inner” development upon success and satisfaction in college and not solely measured by standardized tests or course grades but rather by understanding the impact of the “internal” upon student involvement, happiness and positive character traits. Further, this research (2011) demonstrates that college faculty desire to be engaged with students relative to student self-understanding, questions of meaning and purpose in life, and the development of moral character. Interestingly, these studies demonstrate that a majority of students have expressed a desire to discuss the role of spirituality, broadly conceived, in the academic setting which has been consistently linked with character development. This suggests that many students and faculty would like to engage in these discussions, under the appropriate conditions. However, this research also indicates that many faculty fail to engage in or promote these conversations since they either do not perceive themselves as qualified to do so or they do not find the structural support (from the institution, administrators or within their departments) that they need in order to be effective. This is unfortunate since, as Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) along with Kuh and Umbach (2004) have identified, the classroom is essential in creating not only “communities of learning ... [but also in promoting] “culture-building strategies [that] can work together to fashion a rich, engaging classroom experience that complements the institution's academic values...” (p. 95). However, a vital component of engaging in culture-building strategies is the opportunity for faculty to partner with university divisions that are familiar with this type of culture building and who can assist them in becoming “more intentional about teaching institutional values and traditions ...” (p. 95). Thus, providing faculty and students with the supportive mechanisms they need to engage in these conversations while also encouraging activities that enhance quality reflection and dialogue in the classroom and research lab would seem essential, especially if we are to take seriously the reports of faculty that describe the important task of character development.

Of particular import to the current paper are the twelve conditions<sup>ii</sup> that have been documented toward effective educational practice. While all twelve exist at many institutions of higher education they exist in a particular way as faith-based colleges and universities. Of these conditions those that explicitly engage the “clear, focused institutional mission”, “balancing academic challenge with support for students”, “active learning”, “assessment and feedback” and “high impact activities”, e.g., student-faculty curricular engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, et al, 2010) seem critical to college student success

in faith-based schools. This success will be measured more by the kind of person the graduates become and the character they develop rather than the kinds of jobs they hold or the income they make (Taylor, Parker, Fry, Cohn, Wang, Velasco and Dockterman, 2011). To this end, the dissemination of the mission at a faith-based University that intends to focus on character development is crucial and must therefore take into account the critical role that faculty play, not only in disseminating knowledge but, equally importantly, in transmitting to students life-long habits of learning related to virtue.

### **Faculty and Moral Character Development**

Noting the important role of faculty members in the lives of students both developmentally, academically and socially it seems evident that finding ways to encourage their engagement in character formation would be a priority. Yet there are those who would counter this challenge by suggesting that, "Professors, . . . are trained to transmit knowledge and skills within their chosen discipline, not to help students become more mature, morally perceptive human beings" (Bok, 1987). Such assertions to the contrary the evidence suggests the importance of teachers taking more seriously their roles as promoters of good character and in teaching their students how to live good lives (Arthur 2003, 2009).

Only recently has research begun to investigate factors other than the traditional outcomes (e.g., successful matriculation, GPA, job placement). These other factors critical for student success such as satisfaction, engagement, character development and appreciation for diversity (Arthur, 2003; Arthur, Wilson, Godfrey, Gray & Newton, 2009; Lindholm & Astin, 2007). Additionally, there is support for a greater focus on the development of character and virtue in youth and young adults with a concomitant concern about the role that a "return to ethics in the academy" might have (Dalton & Crosby, 2010; Kiss & Euben, 2010).

Significantly young people are primed for such formative interventions on the part of faculty who can encourage and stimulate such behaviors that engage moral and ethical decision making which in turn can contribute to civil society. Take as two examples the relative success of Teach for America and the national call for service with the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act (111<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2009). Both of these highlight the importance of offering young people a place to develop virtuous and self-less behavior. Both of these examples demonstrate the appeal that being of service for the common good has to the young by offering opportunities to become morally responsible agents of change. Often inspired by what was taught in the college classroom, as well as by who taught the subject and how they taught it, these young adults move into roles of service oriented leadership. With the Kennedy Act in particular these roles are fostered through public policy.

Despite such evidence little has been done to determine what aspects of teaching and student engagement in the classroom actually encourages and fosters the development of good character. Further, even less research has been done to determine how focusing on university mission promotes positive character traits (Van Zanten, 2011). Having provided the basis for such research this paper offers a possibility for a guided faculty intervention that re-imagines the role teacher and course work can have on student character development, engagement in university mission and in critical thinking about meaning and

purpose of life (Appendix A, B, and C). One such way is by engaging virtue-oriented, character-building educational activity into the classroom experience.

Students taught by faculty who intentionally explore character strengths such as integrity, commitment to social contribution, and moral courage while also addressing the mission of a faith-based school would seem more likely at graduation to report an increase in these strengths, articulate the schools mission more effectively, report greater overall satisfaction and wellbeing, and be more likely to work for the common good. In addition, faculty who seek to develop such student character strengths would seem more primed to experience in themselves an increase in these strengths while appreciating the schools mission more fully. A program such as this would provide ways to identify how specific positive character traits can be measured and fostered, while providing a model for ways it could be replicated. By guiding faculty through a series of workshops and offering aids to character transforming curriculum re-design the university can set the stage for on-going student character development that has as its focus what and how the faculty teach and the ways in which students appropriate the information and exercises, while measuring the effects of such efforts.

### **Conclusion**

By systematically emphasizing mission-related values such as integrity, commitment to social contribution and moral courage such a program offers students the opportunity to consciously connect these values to their college education and engage them in their post-graduate professional endeavors. This is especially significant since many college graduates find themselves in leadership roles with increasing levels of authority. No doubt such an effort would assist in reframing conversations about the “value” of a college education moving it from what has been the dominant conversations (particularly in United States) related to student debt ratios and income earning potential to the way such an education can assist the development of good character in young adults. Ultimately this can lead to more virtuous citizens who serve to enrich and contribute to society both during their college experience and beyond. In this effort faith-based, mission driven schools seem especially poised to pilot such a college-based, character development exercise.

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<sup>i</sup> Fang, Steen, & Casadevall (2012) and Chace (2012) along with Hoover (2012) discuss various misconduct issues related to academic integrity. While Hyatt (2012) and Thomas (2007) report on the incidents and issues leading to violent events in schools.

<sup>ii</sup> The twelve conditions identified by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, et al, (2010) are “a clear, focused institutional mission; high standards for student performance; adequate time on task; balancing academic challenge with support for students; emphasis on early months and first year of study; respect for diverse talents and cultural differences; integration of prior learning and experience; ongoing practice of learned skills; active learning; assessment and feedback; collaboration among students; out-of-class contact with faculty.” (p.xi)