



## **Make a Good Living; Live a Good Life: Character and Higher Education**

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## **Make a Good Living; Live a Good Life: Character and Higher Education**

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**Abstract:** This paper emphasizes the importance of integrating character education into higher education to foster both professional success and personal fulfillment. While technical skills such as data analytics and AI are critical in today's job market, the ability to manage relationships and display character traits like empathy, collaboration, creativity, and wisdom are equally, if not more vital. Institutions like Arizona State University are addressing this need by adopting flexible models like Principled Innovation, which encourages values-based learning without imposing rigid lists of virtues or character traits. The article argues that higher education should re-focus on character development, not only because it is important for living a good life, but increasingly essential for operating in the professional sphere.

### **Introduction**

A few years ago, I was leading the planning sessions for what should be in a revised MBA program. One discussion went something like this—Research Analyst “we scraped over 6 million job postings, and the top skills employers want are data analytics, project management, and digital marketing.” Faculty member—“what about people management, leadership, and strategy?” Research Analyst “well... there were some ‘soft skills’ in our research, but most of what we are seeing is a bias towards technical skills.” While I believe programs need to be job relevant, I also believe that the soft and critical thinking skills, often found in interdisciplinary and liberal arts approaches to higher education, are just as, if not more vital. Higher education must honor the tradition of creating well-rounded learners while pushing students to learn new and innovative disciplines. Technical and professional knowledge must be grounded in principles and character. Institutions of higher education should aim to do more than help students get well-paying jobs. Colleges and universities are important social institutions and crucial to the character formation of students and community members (Brooks et. al, 2019). By “character” I mean a set of personal dispositions that guide conduct and inform motivation. Character is who we are and who we are becoming (Jubilee, 2022). Character is built on our values—principles and standards that are important to us. Through character education we engage in an iterative and reflective process trained toward flourishing or as it is sometimes termed, happiness. But I don't mean happiness in the affective sense, though that is good too, what I mean by happiness and flourishing is more akin to what some eastern and western philosophical and religious traditions embrace. For example, Aristotle argues that flourishing or eudaimonia, is a lifelong pursuit to actualize our ultimate human potential. For Aristotle this meant using our reasoning capacity to live virtuously or moderately to achieve life goals (Kristján, 2019). In other words, flourishing is living a purposeful and meaningful life by striving for self-improvement and good character (Rosen, 2024).

Universities should create room for exploration and debate about individual and community character, values, and what living a flourishing life means. Currently, many public universities do not emphasize character development as a core institutional goal (Brant et al., 2022; Kiss and Euben, 2010). We believe institutions of higher education have a responsibility to emphasize values, virtues, and principles congruent with institutional mission and to create space for individuals and groups to explore what character and values means to them. In other words, colleges and universities should aim to help students get great jobs and live good lives. These twin goals are not mutually exclusive, but require university faculty, leaders, and staff to consciously confront the need for character education within the academy.

### **Soft Skills are the New Hard Skills – Character is good for business**

Good jobs are important, and they are important to Arizona State University. A recent survey found ASU's graduates are some of the most employable students from an American public university; trailing only the University of California Berkeley that claimed the top spot (Faller, 2024). Helping students prepare for careers is not mutually exclusive to helping them learn to live lives of meaning and purpose. In fact, with the acceleration of technologically induced labor market disruptions; the skills needed to live the good life are becoming the same skills needed to stand out in the world of work. The World Economic Forum recently noted that employers expect that 44% of their workers' skills could be disrupted within the next few years. The same report shows that analytical and creative thinking are the top two in-demand skills, followed by resilience, motivation, and curiosity (Masterson, 2023). If these sound like “durable skills,” they are... and they could be seen as virtues when viewed through a character formation lens. VIA Character Strengths (2024) categorizes creativity and curiosity in their “wisdom” class of virtues. They place motivation (self-regulation) under the “temperance” category. In short, we are at a time and place where the convergence of technology and the rapid pace of change will make character assets and character development more important than ever.

Adam Grant (2023) points out that the term “soft skills” has its origins in military classification programs. These classifications differentiated between hard skills – meaning skills needed to work with machines, and soft skills – skills needed to work with humans – things like leadership, collaboration, courage, self-control, etc. In a sticky twist of fate, so called “hard skills” were lofted to the top of educational hierarchies. In the wake of advancing technology, particularly with the advent of artificial intelligence, the skills pyramid is being turned on its head. The knowledge, skills, and abilities needed today to be successful in the workplace, positively impact society, and dare I say – be a better person, mostly fall into the category of character. Grant (2023) defines character this way “Personality is your predisposition—your basic instincts for how to think, feel, and act. Character is your capacity to prioritize your values over your instincts.” Character skills that were once the primary domain of religious or civic organizations, must be augmented in the modern world by the professions and intuitions of higher education. This becomes increasingly important in the US where moral foundations once based upon religious traditions are falling to the wayside. This is most obvious in the recent studies by Pew (2024) that show younger people are less likely to be affiliated with formal religious organizations. While it is true that these same data sets show a steady affinity for “spirituality” amongst younger cohorts, it does seem that trust in and affiliation with organized religions are in decline. Similarly, as chronicled and predicted by Putnam (2020) civic and fraternal membership has dwindle over the last 50 years in America. This decline is associated with rises in extremism, tribalism, and other anti-social trends.

Of course, it is true in my view, that striving for better personal character is a good in and of itself. However, in the age of careerism and diverse stakeholders, institutions of higher education must connect the inherently good character skills to the world of work and society building. Brooks e. al. (2022) put it this way “...since only a very small minority of graduates will remain within academia, part of the rationale for universities to intentionally cultivate virtues, even academic virtues, rest on the transferable value into the larger society, including into students’ professional lives...” (p. 10). In this case it becomes imperative to highlight the real-world connections between character skills and the professional sphere. A few examples.

Adam Grant (2024) in his book *Hidden Potential* describes an experiment in West Africa where 1,500 entrepreneurs (a mix of men and women running small start-ups) were randomly assigned to three groups: a control group and two training groups. During training, one group focused on cognitive skills while the other focused on character skills. In the cognitive skills training participants took a course that covered “...finance, accounting, HR, marketing, pricing, and

practiced using what they learned to solve challenges and seize opportunities” (p. 20). In the character skills training group, the founders attended a class designed by psychologists to teach personal initiative. They studied proactivity, discipline, and determination. The character training was more successful than the cognitive training. While the founders had spent just 5 days working on character skills, their company’s profits increased by “an average of 30% over the next two years” (p.20). The 30% increase was almost tripled the effect of those who took the cognitive skills training (note that the cognitive skills training helped, but not nearly as much as the character training that emphasized: proactivity, discipline, and determination).

Similarly, Fred Kiel (2015) finds character-based practices to make real business sense. In his research Kiel names four universal moral principles: “...integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion...” (p. 16). In his studies he notes, “... there is an observable and consistent relationship between character driven leaders and better business results. Leaders with strong morals, and principles, do in fact, deliver a Return on Character.... Leadership that ranks high on the ROC character assessment-scale achieves nearly five times the return on assets that leaders who fall at the bottom of the curve achieve” (p. 3). Again, non-cognitive skills, those that pertain to character really matter to the bottom line. More recently, Cardon (2024) argues that in an AI enhanced world, moral character skills will be even more in demand. He writes:

Our research with business leaders found that virtue, integrity, and strong moral character will be highly sought after in AI-integrated workplaces. When asked which skills will become more important in the AI age, the number one answer was integrity, with 78% of frequent AI users anticipating that this quality will grow in importance. Integrity was followed closely by other traits related to character, including strategic vision, ability to inspire others, and motivation and drive. (p. 1).

And it’s not just in tech related fields that character skills are topping the list. In a recent study by LinkedIn (2019), 91% of professionals agree that soft skills are important to the future of recruiting and HR. The top five soft skills companies need but have a hard time finding are: (1) creativity, (2) persuasion, (3) collaboration, (4) adaptability, and (5) time management. Managers also note that most employees that are dismissed are because of soft skills not hard skills. The adage seems to hold... people are hired and fired based on soft skills. Adam Grant (2023) is correct when he says, “If our cognitive skills are what separates us from animals, our character skills are what elevate us above machines” (p. 22).

It may seem paradoxical to argue that character skills can lead to success in the workplace as well as in our personal lives. After all the pursuit of profit has all kinds of unintended and intended negative consequences. Commenting on the business world David Brooks in *The Road to Character* (2015) writes: “

We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career and leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life... The consumer marketplace encourages us to live by a utilitarian calculus, to satisfy our desires and lose sight of the moral stakes involved in everyday decisions (p. xii).

While market forces make it harder to walk the talk of principled and character-based leadership, I think that as more and more pieces of the global economy become digitized, automated, and powered by AI, the more important character skills become. Grant (2023) recently put it this way: “As more and more cognitive skills, get automated, we’re in the midst of a character revolution. With technological advances placing a premium on interactions and relationships, the skills that make us human are increasingly important to master” (p. 22). Higher education should focus less and less on very specific technical skills. While there will always be a need for hard skill acquisition, the question becomes just how technical higher education should be? Recently, a study at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, showed that ChatGPT did a better job of diagnosing

patients than doctors alone or doctors using AI. This was a surprising result given the human centered nature of patient care. Reporting for the NY Times Gina Kolata (2024) explains, “The chatbot, from the company OpenAI, scored an average of 90 percent when diagnosing a medical condition from a case report and explaining its reasoning. Doctors randomly assigned to use the chatbot got an average score of 76 percent. Those randomly assigned not to use it had an average score of 74 percent” (p.1). The advent of AI and other technology enhanced practices makes me wonder if physicians need more training in the soft skills... character skills. As technology becomes increasingly better at the technical side of medicine doctors must become more proficient in care, compassion, a holistic approach to health, and become curious and creative in solutioning. I agree with David Epstein (2019), the author of the book *Range: How Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. He writes “breadth of training predicts breadth of transfer... the more contexts in which something is learned, the more the learner creates abstract models, and the less they rely on any particular example.” In short, I think one of the main objectives of higher education is to help create master learners—those who can think on their feet, learn new things quickly, and ask the right questions.

This is why at ASU we have resisted the national push to strip down liberal arts curriculum (Cohen, 2016). Not only would the exclusion of the humanities and social sciences that are present in all majors across the university be detrimental to the education of the whole person, it would also hamper efforts to produce graduates prepared for work in science and technology “because education restricted to science and technology does not provide the breadth of instruction in ethics and values offered by the full spectrum of the liberal arts” (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p.317). The objective of public universities should be to produce adaptive master learners who are capable of learning throughout their lifetimes (Crow & Dabars, 2015). Alone, however, relying on general education requirements and liberal arts curriculum is not enough to make higher education institutions true catalysts for character formation. Character education must become part of the institutional mission and be offered in a pan-institutional approach.

### **Principled Innovation, Reflection, & Community**

Because character education is fundamentally about values it can be tricky in public institutions. Public universities serve pluralistic societies and thus must have flexible models. This is why ASU has adopted Principled Innovation (PI) as the university-wide aspiration aimed at improving character education. Principled Innovation is flexible enough to accommodate varied world views and different interpretations of what living a good life or flourishing means. PI also does not impose top-down lists of values or virtues, but rather suggests several practices that help individuals, teams, and colleges identify their core values and thus animate their character. PI started seven years ago in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC). PI was collaboratively developed as a framework and an innovation method with the input of experts, faculty, staff, and students (MLFTC, 2019). In practice, Principled Innovation (PI) is a process that puts character and values at the center of innovation. PI’s goal is to advance positive transformation and flourishing for those in the university community and beyond. Specifically, the PI process is made up of eight practices. These practices are demonstrations of intellectual, moral, civic, and performance character (see figure 1). The framework was informed by the work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham (2022), as well as other models for character education and development. The eight key practices can be applied to various situations. This flexible model has allowed us to roll out PI across the university to disparate groups of students, faculty, and staff. We focus on the framework and practices rather than on a list of prescriptive values or virtues. We recognize that “no definitive list of relevant areas of human experience, and the respective virtues can be given, as the virtues will, to a certain extent, be relative to individual

constitution, developmental stage, and social circumstance” (Jubilee, 2022, p.8). By focusing on process and actions rather than philosophical or religious worldviews we have created space for different groups to draw on their own backgrounds and read meaning into the PI practices and framework for themselves. This flexibility has been key in gaining buy-in and adoption across the university.

## Principled Innovation



### Four PI Character Domains:

- Moral
- Civic
- Intellectual
- Performance

### Eight PI Practices:

- Identify and Acknowledge Fundamental Values
- Utilize Moral and Ethical Decision Making
- Understand Culture and Context
- Engage Multiple and Diverse Perspectives
- Develop Habits of an Informed Decision-Maker
- Reflect Critically and Compassionately
- Design Creative Solutions
- Navigate Uncertainty & Mitigate Consequences

Figure 1. Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. (2019). Principled innovation in the systems of educator and leader preparation (2nd ed.). Tempe: Author. Used with Permission.

In terms of implementation, I would like to focus on three of the eight PI practices (1) reflect critically and compassionately (2) Identify and acknowledge fundamental values, and (3) engage multiple and diverse perspectives. These practices can be compared to Lamb, Brant, and Brooks (2021) seven evidence-based strategies to cultivating virtue and character: habituation through practice, reflection on personal experience, engagement with virtuous examples, dialogue that increases virtue literacy, awareness of situational variables, moral reminders, and friendships of mutual accountability. What emerges, in my mind, when looking at the PI practices and 7 strategies are common themes. Themes that emphasize the importance of “reflection” both individually and collectively, as well as the importance of “community” for positive character formation, and the powerful vehicle of habits for organizational change.

### Reflection & Narrative

One of our practices at ASU states “identify and acknowledge, fundamental values.” One way to help people identify their values or character assets is to reflect on their own personal stories. Stories can reveal what we value because our core narratives act as mechanisms of self-discovery and identity creation (Eakin, 2004; McAdams, 2001). For instance, Eakin (2004) writes, “...autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out... structures our living” (p. 122). Narrative becomes a means, as well as a reflective mechanism of self-identity creation. Not only does the individual reflect on the events that have made their life histories, but they also actively engage in “filtering” this autobiography to “... gain insight into...” their own “... nature, values, and goals” (Singer, 2004, p. 442). The sense of self that arises out of narratives is derived from the creation of a cohesive set of life themes (Eakin, 2004, p. 122). This is often achieved

through linking and interpreting life history. For instance, McAdams (2001) writes, “...autobiographical memory helps to locate and define the self within an ongoing life story...” (p. 107). In other words, life stories help individuals to define who they are in the context of past, present, and potential future histories. This thematic story(s) then becomes an important basis for making sense of life and in turn help reveal our values. Because values and principles are the building blocks of character, we believe narrative is key to formation.

One tool we are using in our PI work is called the “Perpetual Prompt” created by Liz Lerman and modified by the PI team to help individuals identify thematic values in their own stories. The prompt is “I come from... which shaped my character and values... and resulted in...” In presenting this prompt we explain that the first part is open to interpretation... where do you see yourself coming from? The UK, a family of teachers, a religious background? The second part of the prompt is meant to help people make the connection from their personal histories and world views to what they value. The last part is the “so what” ... the idea is to illicit responses that show that values embedded in personal narrative are then lived in various ways. We have found this, as well as other forms of storytelling, from personal conversations to case studies, to be a good way to start the reflective process of identifying values. As faculty, staff, and students participate in story-based activities, they begin to flesh out the underlying values that power their character. They also can compare and contrast similarities and differences in world views with those in their communities. Through reflection we all begin to uncover and redefine the principles we live by and at ASU, the principles that drive innovation.

### **Community & Habits**

Michael Lamb, (2024) in *The Necessity of Character* writes “We cannot become virtuous through isolated or one-off efforts; character is highly dependent on repeated practice within support of institutional and communal conditions” (p. 204). Community matters and our associations shape us. Studies show that the best predictor of happiness is the quality of social relationships (Wilson, 2011). Or that something as trivial as the most common car we see in the neighborhood has an influence on our vehicle purchasing preferences (Berger, 2016), or that the degree to which we are socially embedded in our communities predicts longevity (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Because social circles exert so much influence over our lives, I believe it is important to use positive communities to help shape character.

One of our main methods of embedding Principled Innovation and character throughout ASU, is via communities of practice (CoPs). These groups of 5-15 people meet a couple times a month to discuss individual and collective work as situated in the PI framework. By gathering in person, and sometimes virtually, we have created a set of CoP's that serve 14+ colleges and units. The CoP's act as places for the organic formation of friendships of accountability, discussion of moral exemplars, and become a reflective site for character formation.

Community also shapes habits. William James (1899) famously said “...we are mere bundles of habits.” So strong is the human tendency toward habituation that whole industries are built on breaking and creating habits. In our work across the university, we have found it useful to find existing momentum and use it to our advantage. For example, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences had an interest in sustainable food systems and local farming. As part of a PI funded program, they have incorporated a student service-learning course that teaches the virtues of environmental stewardship, care, work ethic, cooperation, humility, and adaptability by working on a local farm. Similarly, we have leveraged the two institutional habits or traditions to advance character formation across the university. First, there has been a long-standing tradition of “presidents awards” for exceptional work. One award was named the “President’s Award for Innovation.” We have now collaboratively re-tooled the judging criteria to reflect character-based

items and renamed the award the “President’s Award for Principled Innovation.” We have also found ways to insert high-level character concepts into the new employee onboarding training. In this way, we continually ask ourselves which directions individuals, teams, and projects are headed that might align with Principled Innovation and values-based education.

## **Conclusion**

While I was at Thunderbird, I taught a monthly webinar that was recorded and posted on the school’s youtube channel. One of my classes became the most popular video on the school’s site. It was a session on positive psychology and the science of happiness. I was a bit surprised. I had other classes on change management and negotiations, but this one seemed to hit a nerve. In talking with students, it became clear that an intense yearning for meaning was driving interest. It seemed that even “business students” wanted to confront the philosophical questions of life and find purpose. I believe that this is the type of education students need most and that it can be expanded through the careful growth of Principled Innovation at ASU. Over the next few years, we will continue to embed PI into the university culture through a largely decentralized approach. We believe that the Principled Innovation framework, practices, and aligned initiatives will help ASU become more innovative and ethical at the same time. We also believe that PI will help our students live lives of meaning, be better employees and citizens, be equipped to grapple with the challenges of modernity and technological advancements and become adaptive master learners who make a good living for their families, and lead lives of meaning and purpose.

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