UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 14th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2026.

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Abstract

How can character virtues be cultivated at a large, pluralistic, public university? In this presentation, we introduce a model for civic character education at scale for the University of Illinois and its peer institutions. We leverage a beloved campus symbol, the Alma Mater statue, as a heuristic for students to refine the character virtue of neighborliness (character "caught"). This virtue is then embedded in courses via our We CU service-learning program (character "taught"). Finally, we foster neighborliness development through volitional self-reflection, prompting students to consider how their choices and actions (character "sought") will help them "live like Alma."

In the iconography of American higher education, the "Alma Mater" is usually a seated affair. If you visit Columbia University, for instance, you will find Daniel Chester French's version of the mother figure sitting on a bronze throne, an Athena presiding over the steps of Low Library with a scepter in hand. She is a guardian of the ivory tower, immovable and remote. But at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (hereafter, "Illinois"), the sculptor Lorado Taft—himself a graduate of the Class of 1879—offered a radically different interpretation.

Taft's Alma Mater stands with her arms open wide. She is flanked by two attendant figures, "Labor" and "Learning," who clasp hands over the back of her throne. Labor and Learning represent the character virtues of collaboration and curiosity, the twin engines powering students' Illinois experience. Yet, crucially, the throne itself sits empty. "Alma" has left the seat of power, arms wide, stepping forward as if she is walking down Green Street and greeting her neighbors.

Alma's departure from her throne is no abdication. It is an instruction. Taft's bronze ensemble suggests that the ultimate goal of the university is not to hoard knowledge within the safety of the throne, but to carry it outward. For the modern student, the statue offers a visual mandate: to take the "learning and labor" honed on campus and bring it to the community. The image challenges us to join the surrounding community not as rulers, but as good neighbors.

Focus 1: Describing How Neighborliness May Be "Caught, Taught, and Sought" at Illinois

In this paper, we will summarize our year of work on educating neighborliness, which we define as "compassion, care, and respect for all those in one's community."[1] We believe that

[1] We are deeply grateful for the support of Wake Forest University's Educating Character Initiative, which has funded and advised us during this capacity building year. We are also grateful to our Jubilee Centre colleagues, who have provided vital guidance and collaboration as we have begun our character education journey.

understanding neighborliness, as it is experienced at Illinois, requires a deep knowledge of our history and our people. As such, we begin the paper with a foundational overview of **the history of the American Midwest and Illinois.** With this foundation provided, our **first focus**, and one central to the aims of this conference, will be to describe how our work on neighborliness is inspired by and may contribute to the Jubilee Centre's framework of dividing strategies of character development into "caught, taught, and sought." As such, we describe key components of a nascent program to support Illinois students' development of the civic character virtue of neighborliness. We believe that public research universities like Illinois have a role to play in "educating for democracy," particularly in contentious historical moments. The University of Illinois is committed to the academic and social, emotional, and behavioral development of its students, but the campus has not fully achieved this aim. To educate for democracy, public research universities like Illinois need to consider how to promote *civic character virtues* like neighborliness. Therefore, a core question of our work is: "*How do you create a program that effectively promotes neighborliness among students at a large, public, research-intensive American university?*"

Our team has spent the past year consulting with Illinois leadership, faculty, and students, and community members to answer this question. We believe that developing student character virtues at Illinois requires a few important steps, arrayed on the "caught, taught, and sought" strategies described in *The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools*, hereafter the *Framework*.

1. **Caught**: Large, public research universities like Illinois lack a shared religious or ethical foundation for students. For a character virtue to be "caught" on a campus like Illinois, it must be uniquely resonant to that place and linked to a beloved

University symbol. We argue that neighborliness is a character virtue that resonates at Illinois, and our Alma Mater statue provides that symbol.

2. **Taught**: In addition to leveraging the groundbreaking work on character education conducted by the Jubilee Centre and its collaborators, an effective character education program should not "reinvent the wheel." It must leverage existing university resources, pedagogical expertise, and community ties to teach character virtues. We leverage Illinois' "We CU" program in this project.
3. **Sought:** Character virtue education programs will not be successful on a campus like Illinois if they are compulsory. To succeed, our program must empower students to seek out their character development through reflection activities that harness their desire to find a sense of purpose. Our project involves careful development of these key activities.

Focus 2: Broadening Theory on Neighborliness

The **second focus** of this paper is a deeper exploration of neighborliness itself. We integrate four theoretical viewpoints of neighborliness, each of which will feature in our project. The first viewpoint sees neighborliness as a civic character virtue described in the Jubilee Centre's *Framework* and other similar neo-Aristotelean theories. A second viewpoint understands neighborliness as being located at the intersection of person and context. This "relational" view of character from Lerner and Nucci sees neighborliness as a characteristic of communities. A third viewpoint understands neighborliness as a self-regulatory act; that is, a person's goal-oriented, intentional actions toward fostering a neighborly community. The fourth viewpoint views neighborliness, and other character virtues, through a developmental lens. Using research and theory on social, emotional, and behavioral skills (Soto, Napolitano, Roberts), we

argue that a person can challenge themselves to intentionally adopt a neighborly "posture," (Baehr), even if it is currently difficult or uncommon for them. Over time and practice, these postures inform and hasten students' development of neighborliness. We hope that this theoretical discussion on the conceptualization of neighborliness will contribute to ongoing philosophical work on character and character education, and various branches of the psychological sciences such as developmental, personality, and educational psychology.

Neighborliness in the American Midwest and at the University of Illinois

The Midwest is a region in the heart of the United States that includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin (U.S. Census Bureau). Home to nearly a quarter of the U.S. population, the region is hardly "flyover country," as outsiders claim. Nevertheless, the nickname does illuminate the geography of the region, which hosts several large cities, thousands of small agricultural towns, and tens of thousands of acres of rural farmland and unincorporated communities. Yet as historian William Cronon demonstrates (1992), urban centers and rural communities are not separate from one another; rather, they exist because of each other and support one another. This interdependence shapes the social values and everyday practices that define midwestern identity.

We believe that Midwestern character, sometimes described as "Midwest nice," is most clearly defined by a deeply rooted ethic of neighborliness, which we define as "compassion, care, and respect for all those in one's community." In the Midwest, neighborliness is a practiced moral and social framework that shapes how people interact, solve problems, and sustain their communities. Early experiences on family farms, in small towns, or bustling city centers teach Midwesterners that personal thriving depends on attentiveness to others, shared effort, and

collective care. Curiosity and collaboration extend this ethic: curiosity fosters attentiveness to neighbors' needs and knowledge, whereas collaboration transforms goodwill into coordinated, meaningful action. Together, these qualities cultivate communities oriented toward integrity, practical problem-solving, and quiet resilience.

Historical and contemporary thinkers further illuminate what makes Midwestern character distinctive. Frank Lloyd Wright, Hamlin Garland, and Frederick Jackson Turner connected regional identity to place, community, and social networks, showing how careful observation, reflection, and shared work built resilient communities (Lauck et al., 2018). Contemporary scholars emphasize the region's egalitarian spirit, its reliance on cooperation, and the way environmental abundance is intertwined with social responsibility (McClelland, 2023) Additionally, in 2013, the Midwest Governors Association took to the streets to ask average Midwesterners themselves what defines a person from the region. Interviewers recorded diversity, a variety of religions and politics, and happiness. However, the majority of interviewees mentioned collaborative work, being a good neighbor, being friendly and caring, and community focused. Empirical research, done the same year at Cambridge, confirms that Midwesterners tend to score higher in friendliness and agreeableness, supporting the view that cooperative, neighbor-focused behavior is culturally embedded (Potter et al., 2013).

Yet it is important to acknowledge that dominant narratives of Midwestern identity have often centered whiteness, framing Midwesterners of color primarily in relation to white experiences of privilege or resistance. Notably, Arab, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, Black, and other communities have long assigned meaning to this place, affirmed their own histories and networks, and actively shaped the region (Howard, 2023). For example, the Midwest is home to a number of towns created by and for the Black community. A Black man, Frank McWorter,

platted the town of New Philadelphia, Illinois, in 1836 (Shackel, 2010). While the town no longer exists, McWorter's descendants have worked for decades to get the town recognized on the national stage, and the National Park Service designated it a National Historic Site in 2022 (McWorter & Williams-McWorter, 2018). The move affirmed Black Midwesterners' longstanding role in shaping the region.

Still, Black residents of New Philadelphia and the Midwest faced entrenched racism and anti-Black violence. "Sundown towns" dotted the Midwestern landscape and threatened violence toward any person of color who dared to stay past dusk. In cities and towns, white residents relied on violence and redlining to enforce strict segregation. Starting in the 1930s, banks and insurers refused services to neighborhoods that housed Black or low-income residents, labeling them "high-risk" on maps. These practices perpetuated racial segregation and hastened the formation of wealthy, all-white enclaves in cities and surrounding suburbs. Redlining also prevented Black residents from amassing generational wealth, which caused long-term harm to Black families and communities (Chicago History Museum, 2020). These practices continue to influence the geography of Midwestern cities and towns today, and their legacy shapes Midwesterns' perceptions and experiences (Green Book Global). This history reminds us that regions are ideological constructions built on stolen land through the labor of people of color.

Indeed, communities' attachments to place are not secondary; they are central to the region's identity and vitality (Howard, 2023). Midwestern character emerges as a product of interdependence, shaped by neighborliness and sustained through curiosity and collaboration. At the same time, it is produced and enriched by the diverse communities who inhabit the region, whose histories, contributions, and relationships to place complicate and expand dominant understandings of what it means to be Midwestern. Thus, to be Midwestern is to engage with

place and people: to care for neighbors, to participate in shared work, and to recognize that communities of all backgrounds make the region what it is.

History of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Understanding neighborliness, as it is experienced at Illinois, requires a deep knowledge of the history of our region and our campus. This history helps explain how land-grant institutions like the University of Illinois became engines of research, agricultural extension, and public service, reshaping regional economies and everyday life (Bickell, 2022). In the early nineteenth century, American settlers pushed westward, and systems of formal education trailed slowly behind the frontier. Scattered single-room schoolhouses dotted rural landscapes, but opportunities for higher education remained scarce. American universities largely catered to wealthy elites, and most concentrated in urban centers along the East Coast. Increasingly, it became evident that Americans needed practical training in agriculture, engineering, and the mechanical arts to sustain the country's rapid economic growth.

The Morrill Act of 1862 transformed this landscape. Passed during the Civil War and signed by President Abraham Lincoln, the act granted nearly 11 million acres of federal lands to individual states to establish public universities focused on agriculture and mechanical arts. The act aimed to democratize higher education and make it accessible to working-class Americans. It also aimed to support the practical needs of a rapidly industrializing nation (Bickell, 2022; Lee & Ahtone, 2020). Of course, the Morrill Act's legacy is inseparable from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and the expansion of public higher education rested on the seizure of Native homelands. By transforming tribal land–stolen through treaties, military coercion, and other forms of forced removal–into financial assets for states and colleges, the Morrill Act heightened

the tension between democratization for some and displacement of others. Thus, scholars and activists sometimes refer to the act as a "land-grab" rather than land-grant.

The University of Illinois was founded in 1867 under the Morrill Act of 1862. As a land-grant institution dedicated to "learning and labor" Illinois promised to unite intellectual inquiry with the practical skills required for agricultural and mechanical advancement. The school's geographic placement informed this promise. Most of the state of Illinois' population is heavily concentrated in a single metropolitan area, Chicago. However, state legislators selected the prairie towns of Urbana and Champaign as the university's home, as these towns were close enough to be attractive to Chicagoans but rural enough to embrace the students they sought to serve. Early state legislators expected the university to serve farmers, mechanics, and the working public, and the curriculum emphasized agriculture, engineering, and applied sciences. This combination of practical training and democratic access distinguished Illinois from other universities and helped define campus's early identity (Hoxie, 2017). It also helped connect the city of Chicago and its people to the state's rural hinterlands.

Over time, Illinois underwent several significant transitions that reshaped its identity, but the university maintained its land-grant foundations. Agricultural and engineering programs remained central, and the institution became a major site of scientific innovation. The development of the Morrow Plots, pioneering research in plant pathology, and early engineering achievements all positioned the university as a leader in applied research. By the early twentieth century, Illinois expanded into the "hard sciences" of physics, chemistry, and computer science. This burgeoning research laid the groundwork for the university's reputation as a powerhouse of scientific discovery and a leading research university with national and international stature (Hoxie, 2017).

This evolution reshaped the university's student body. As Illinois' research profile expanded, so did its geographic reach. The university's predominantly in-state student population transitioned into one of the largest and most diverse in the country. Today, the University of Illinois enrolls more than 56,000 students; 22.3 percent of these students are out-of-state residents, and more than 22.5 percent are international students. These students bring wide-ranging cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds to campus (University of Illinois). This diversity contributes to a community with multiple faith traditions represented in student organizations, cultural centers, and worship spaces. Nevertheless, the University of Illinois maintains its public status, and it has never adopted an official religious or moral framework. Its commitments have instead grown out of civic, democratic, and community-oriented ideals rather than a single codified religious or moral tradition.

Because of this institutional history, the University of Illinois does not possess a formal tradition of character education grounded in a specific virtues framework. However, that does not mean campus ignored the topic of character altogether. Illinois' first Dean of Men, Thomas Arkle Clark, linked student discipline with moral development and the cultivation of personal responsibility. Clark understood that he was shaping students' character by guiding their conduct, promoting integrity, and fostering habits that were essential to good citizenship. Clark's work helped make the Dean of Men's office an early administrative site for character education on university campuses nationwide (Schwartz, 2010).

Irene Pierson, the Social Director of the Illini Union from 1940 to 1962, also promoted students' development into productive citizens. Pierson's student etiquette guide *Campus Cues* answered more than five hundred questions solicited from Illinois students. Described as a "social 'road map' for college students and a veritable encyclopedia of what is proper," *Campus*

Cues outlined socially acceptable conduct and advised students on everything from how to ask someone out on a date, to what to do if you see a professor outside of the classroom, to how to present yourself for a job interview. In her own words, Pierson stated,"A college education…should increase your contacts and provide many meaningful personal relations. School, home, and other social groups are perfect laboratories in which to learn as well as to practice social skills" (Review of *Campus Cues*, 1957, 3). Accordingly, the book emphasized common sense, kindness, sincerity, gratitude, humility, and humor, among other things. Written to shape students into well-mannered contributing citizens, Pierson's book clearly centered character and morality.

Clark and Pierson's early efforts to educate students' character never coalesced into an institution-wide character education program, though. Illinois has never developed a sustained program for educating student citizenship or moral formation like those found at religiously affiliated universities. Instead, Illinois has tended to frame its commitments in terms of public engagement, civic responsibility, and the development of students as community contributors.

In recent years, however, the university has made several commitments that resonate strongly with contemporary approaches to educating character and civic virtues. Notably, Illinois is a member of the College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, a national coalition dedicated to strengthening democratic engagement, empathy, civil discourse, and intellectual openness on college campuses. Alongside this, the university has participated in initiatives such as the Campus Community Compact, which emphasizes community integrity, respect, responsibility, and shared values that support a healthy learning environment. While these commitments do not constitute a formal character-education tradition, they reflect a clear institutional effort to cultivate the kinds of virtues that align with broader public-service missions.

Illinois as a Context for Neighborliness Education: Challenges and Opportunities

Cultivating neighborliness among a diverse set of students on a tightening budget presents challenges, but it also presents a unique opportunity. If we build a character education program that works on this enormously complex campus, we believe that program could adapt to work anywhere. Therefore, we now discuss the institutional context that directly informs our proposed character education program, illustrating the particular challenges and opportunities for promoting neighborliness at Illinois.

The Illinois student body does not share a monolithic social, religious, or ethical framework. Any civic character education program must integrate a diverse set of traditions to move toward meaningful implementation. Students come to Illinois from all over the world, and nearly every faith tradition is represented on campus. Unlike a Jesuit university, for example, there is not a single text or tradition that all students share that can be used as a foundation for a program. Moreover, as a public university in the United States, explicitly privileging any one faith tradition is forbidden, and freedom of expression and freedom to dissent are cherished rights for all community members.

The United States' current political climate presents a second challenge. The American electorate is exceedingly polarized, and this polarization limits our capacity to bridge interpersonal and inter-political party divides. Moreover, American universities face considerable political cross-pressures to promote unfettered freedom of expression while restricting pedagogical content related to race, gender, sexuality, and disability. These contradictory pressures necessitate deft navigation and increase the stakes of civic character education.

Third, these political cross-pressures come at a time when American universities face austerity and budgetary limitations, in part due to the restriction of federal research funds. Universities are hesitant to launch large-scale, resource intensive programs that do not clearly align with the institution's values and mission. Therefore, any new programs must leverage existing resources and thriftily demonstrate impact—while also moving toward fiscal sustainability and securing external donor support.

Though formidable, these challenges also represent clear opportunities. Other universities have large, pluralistic, international student bodies similar to Illinois'. This gives us the unique opportunity to build a model for civic character education *at scale,* and it allows us to contribute scientific knowledge about how to educate character among the broadest swaths of young people. This model is not essentially bespoke and tailored to students from one campus, one faith tradition, or one way of life. Rather, this model is replicable and adaptable to other large, public institutions. At the same time, this contentious political moment cries out for solutions that bring people together around shared values and viewpoints. And while it is impossible to predict the fiscal future of higher education in the United States, any successful civic character education work will dramatically reduce the financial barriers to entry for similar institutions. Other campuses can build upon or iterate the work we do at Illinois and launch their own programs despite internal budget crunches. Indeed, we argue that *here* at Illinois and *now*–in this politically contentious, fiscally uncertain era–is the right time to be thinking about civic character education at research intensive public universities.

Describing How Neighborliness May Be "Caught, Taught, and Sought" at Illinois

We turn now to describe, in detail, how our work has been inspired by and may contribute to the Jubilee Centre's framework for dividing strategies for character development

into "caught, taught, and sought." Our goal in this section is to describe the key components of our program to support Illinois students' development of the character virtue of neighborliness. First, we briefly review our process for identifying the character virtues of neighborliness, curiosity, and collaboration. We then move into a deeper description of our proposed program, organized around the Jubilee *Framework*.

Identifying focal and supporting character virtues at Illinois

For a character virtue to be "caught, taught, and sought," it must deeply resonate across a campus community. A "one size fits all" approach is unlikely to "catch" in the same way on a different campus with a different history. Campus buy-in for a character virtue program requires careful alignment. To that end, our team initiated a year-long process to gather data and feedback from campus and community stakeholders. Although time and resource intensive, this process informed and upheld our focal virtue selection. Other peer institutions would need to take this time-intensive alignment work on if they wish to develop bespoke character education programs.

Several factors informed our selection of focal virtues. First, we leveraged the expertise of our interdisciplinary team, specifically our humanities scholars, to research the history of the University of Illinois and the American Midwest. Second, we consulted the Jubilee Centre Building Blocks of Character to identify candidate virtues. We reviewed each of the civic character virtues and mapped those virtues onto aspects of our campus's history, context, and location. We found inspiration in the unlikeliest of places: a bronze statue. With "Alma" in mind, we then reviewed the University of Illinois' mission, vision, and strategic plan to identify virtues that aligned. Third, we presented our preliminary focal virtues to more than 75 University of Illinois administrators, faculty members, and community leaders during formal and informal "listening lunch" sessions. Our colleagues' feedback confirmed the viability of our project and

informed our final decision to select the focal character virtue of *neighborliness* and two supporting virtues of *curiosity* and *collaboration*.

Curiosity and Collaboration

We begin by describing the supporting virtues of *curiosity* and *collaboration*. Turning again to Illinois' Alma Mater statue, recall that Laredo Taft's sculpture includes two men, representing "Learning" and "Labor," clasping hands above a throne symbolizing the university. We deploy these figures to represent two character virtues that exemplify the Illinois academic experience: the intellectual virtue of *curiosity*, which we define as "interest, openness, and an eagerness to understand the world," and the performance virtue of *collaboration*, which we define as "cooperation, contribution, and commitment to working with others toward a shared purpose."[2]

These virtues align closely with the values and lived experiences of Illinois' faculty and students. Faculty regard curiosity as a foundation of discovery, innovation, and lifelong learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration is a hallmark of the Illinois faculty experience. For their part, Illinois students are academically motivated, and they excel at working in teams to tackle complex assignments and global . Moreover, curiosity and collaboration are cornerstones of many of the prominent student groups on campus, such as Illinois Business Consulting. This student-run business consulting group has a strong track record of serving clients in our community and around the globe.

Curiosity and collaboration also closely align with Illinois' Student Learning Outcomes (ISLOs). The ISLOs serve as markers for the university's accreditation and inform the approval of new courses, programs of study, and degrees. Curiosity, as an intellectual virtue, aligns well

[2] We consider *collaboration* to be synonymous with *teamwork* in the Jubilee Centre *Framework*.

with the ISLOs of "Intellectual Reasoning and Knowledge" and "Creative Inquiry and Discovery." Collaboration, as a performance virtue, aligns well with "Effective Leadership and Community Engagement" and "Social Awareness and Cultural Understanding." Aligning our supporting virtues with the ISLOs served two important purposes. First, it provided an entry point for discussions with university administrators, who are keen to align campuswide initiatives with the university's mission, values, and priorities. Second, alignment with the ISLOs could accelerate the approval of future service learning courses informed by our model.

Finally, curiosity and collaboration have clear resonance regionally. The American Midwest has long been a cradle for intellectual curiosity and innovation, and Illinois is one of the region's strongest centers of gravity. Illinois faculty and alumni have won 24 Nobel Prizes, 2 Turing Awards, 2 Fields Medals, and 27 Pulitzer Prizes, among other awards. While these awards are often bestowed on individuals, academic research is a collective enterprise grounded in shared commitment to lifelong learning. Indeed, curiosity and collaboration are key to artistic innovation and scientific breakthrough.

Neighborliness

Our focal virtue is *neighborliness*, which we define as "compassion, care, and respect for all those in one's community." Just as curiosity and collaboration drive the university's internal academic engine, neighborliness directs that energy outward. Neighborliness is deeply resonant with the cultural identity of the American Midwest, where it functions as a "practiced moral and social framework" essential for community well-being. Our choice of neighborliness is also a strategic response to our institutional identity. As a land-grant university, Illinois has a historic mandate to serve the public good. While the University's stated mission emphasizes its

leadership on a state, national, and global scale, there is a compelling need to ensure this impact is felt just as strongly in our own backyard.

By centering neighborliness, we seek to expand the university's vision—which traditionally focuses on transforming the state and the world—to explicitly prioritize our immediate local context. The "Alma Project" challenges the university to bridge the gap between global prestige and local engagement, urging students and faculty to be not just residents of Urbana-Champaign, but active, contributing neighbors. This aligns with the visual message of Taft's *Alma Mater* statue itself: Alma does not hoard knowledge on the throne. Rather, she steps forward to greet the community. Consequently, fostering neighborliness is not just a nice addition to student life. It is a necessary step in fulfilling the land-grant promise to join the surrounding community as good neighbors

How Neighborliness May Be "Caught, Taught, and Sought" at Illinois

The "Alma Project" proposes a model of civic character development designed specifically for the constraints and opportunities of a large, public, research-intensive university. Inspired by the Jubilee Centre's *Framework*, our program integrates three core components: leveraging a beloved campus symbol to help students "catch" the virtue of neighborliness; utilizing existing, high-quality service learning infrastructure to ensure the virtue is "taught" at scale; and deploying structured reflection activities that empower students to "seek" their own character development by connecting academic skill-building with burgeoning senses of purpose. In this section, we review the components of our proposed project.

Neighborliness "Caught:" Using a beloved symbol to embody neighborliness for our students

We cannot rely on a shared cultural foundation to communicate moral concepts on a pluralistic campus like Illinois. Some cultural touchpoints can unite a diverse campus community. Statues and monuments serve as visual synecdoche for the institution itself. These symbols "stick" in students' minds, often outlasting the specific content of a syllabus.

To help students "catch" the virtue of neighborliness, we propose using the *Alma Mater* statue not merely as a mascot, but as a cognitive scaffold. We do not expect every student to memorize a complex philosophical framework regarding the civic virtue of neighborliness. Instead, we aim to equip them with a heuristic—a mental image they can carry with them to adjudicate moral dilemmas with *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. We want our graduating students, many of whom will move to new communities and make new neighbors, to take Alma with them as a reminder to be neighborly.

Specifically, the "Alma Project" reframes the statue's iconography to tell a coherent character story. We present the supporting figures, "Learning" and "Labor," as representations of *Curiosity* (an intellectual virtue) and *Collaboration* (a performance virtue). Most critically, we interpret the *Alma Mater's* "empty throne" as an instruction. By stepping off the pedestal with arms wide, Alma models a "neighborly posture." This interpretation provides students with an accessible, visual definition of neighborliness: leaving one's seat of power or comfort to greet the community with "compassion, care, and respect." By anchoring abstract ethical concepts in a physical symbol they all know, we increase the likelihood that the virtue is internalized, remembered, and "caught" amidst the noise of a modern university experience.

Neighborliness "Taught": Leveraging service learning expertise and infrastructure

The University of Illinois is primed to take on the challenge of educating character at scale. Even with the contemporary funding squeeze, Illinois is well-resourced, and is able to

educate large numbers of students across disciplines at a rigorous level. Even still, a well-formed framework and a heuristic does not guarantee change. Meaningful change requires infrastructure and quality pedagogical content.

Civic education and engaged learning are central to the Illinois experience. Service learning involves experiential learning through a cyclical process of planning, action, and reflection within community settings. Well-delivered service learning combines structured educational experiences with the opportunity to collaborate and cultivate a deeper, shared understanding of the needs, interests, and lives of others. Deliberation, teamwork, and effective action lie at the heart of service learning, as do certain core virtues that enable students, faculty, and community partners to foster a shared sense of purpose and work for a common good.

Service learning is a viable pedagogical approach to character education and virtues development. Service learning encourages the development of civic, intellectual, moral, and performance virtues, and it has the potential to mold students into responsible and engaged citizens. Service learning not only contributes to students' personal flourishing; it also contributes to the betterment of the communities in which they live. Service learning builds interpersonal relationships and strengthens students' sense of belonging to the community, both in terms of their campus and the wider community of which campus is a part (Billig, 2002, Blyth, 2014; Thelma, 2024; Moller, 2025). This is especially important at Illinois, where most undergraduate students spend only three to four years enrolled. Service learning also has real benefits for community members. By building stronger connections between campus and community, service learning promises to inject new resources, energy, and perspectives into a community organization. These benefits can amplify an organization's reach, increase public awareness of key issues, and help make organizational goals more attainable.

There is widespread buy-in for service learning at Illinois. Across the institution, there are service learning courses across multiple disciplines and academic levels. The We CU Community Engaged Scholars program (We CU) helps faculty develop and refine these service learning courses at Illinois. Since 2020, We CU has supported instructors from 160 service learning courses reaching 3,000 students campuswide. Leveraging a deep partnership with the School of Social Work's Community Learning Lab (CLL), We CU offers project matching with more than 200 local nonprofits and government agencies. Collaborations between service learning instructors and community organizations allow students to connect their coursework to local needs while developing character virtues. For example, last spring, We CU matched DREAAM, an academic and social development program for African American boys in Champaign, with Educational Psychology Professor Chris Napolitano. Professor Napolitano's course gives Illinois students the opportunity to plan and administer quantitative research in collaboration with DREAAM's leaders. For each project match, We CU centers community priorities in course development, allowing community partners to participate on their own terms through the co-creation of service learning projects.

"Neighborliness Sought:" Reflection activities that promote neighborliness by leveraging students' sense of purpose

Finally, character education cannot be compulsory. For virtues to endure, they must be volitionally "sought" by the student. To bridge the gap between classroom instruction and personal commitment, we harness two powerful psychological motivators: the desire for professional skill development and the search for purpose.

Students may enter service-learning courses seeking to build their CVs or acquire technical skills. This is a valid entry point. However, through the "Alma Project," we utilize

structured reflection activities to broaden and deepen this motivation. Reflection can serve as a critical mechanism of purpose acquisition and refinement (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Moran, 2009), and research by Yeager and colleagues (2014) demonstrates that giving students an opportunity to reflect on how their activities may be of service to the world around them significantly improves their persistence on tedious or difficult tasks. Thus, guided reflection may aid students in shifting their orientations to service-learning entirely (e.g., from prioritizing benefits to the self to prioritizing benefits for others).

But beyond shifting students' orientations, reflection may solidify and strengthen students' existing prosocial interests (Moran, 2009). Indeed, students are often drawn to service-learning courses when they have prosocial aims (Hill et al., 2010; Moran et al., 2013), and those who enter the course with a developing (but perhaps not maximally strong) "beyond-the-self" purpose may stand to benefit most. For these students, the course does not merely introduce a new concept, but validates and catalyzes an existing value system. Major theories of personality development would support this argument, as people tend to choose environments that align with their existing dispositions, which are then reinforced and encouraged to elaborate once immersed in those "corresponding" conditions (e.g., Caspi et al., 2005). By providing the specific vocabulary and framework of neighborliness to students already primed for civic engagement, we believe we can unlock a steeper developmental trajectory than might be seen in the general student population. This may be especially likely in an environment like Illinois, where students' outward-facing efforts are readily supported, rewarded, and reflected through congruent activities across campus (Burrow et al., 2021).

Focus 2: Broadening Theory on Neighborliness

The pedagogical architecture of the "Alma Project" is constructed upon the Jubilee Centre's *Framework*. Moreover, the intellectual foundation of the project comes from the Jubilee Centre's neo-Aristotelean virtue ethics. With these firm foundations, in this brief section, we aim to broaden theory on neighborliness from a character virtue-only perspective to one that incorporates various vantages from across the social and behavioral sciences. We believe that to educate for neighborliness at a large, pluralistic research university, we must interrogate what neighborliness actually *is* from a psychological and developmental standpoint.

A single theoretical lens cannot capture the complexity of neighborliness as it is lived and experienced by young people in universities. Therefore, our conceptualization draws from four complementary theoretical vantage points: the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition; relational developmental systems metatheory; the psychology of self-regulation; and the science of social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) skills. In this section, we explore how integrating these literatures provides a robust, multi-dimensional definition of neighborliness that is both philosophically sound and empirically measurable.

Neighborliness as a Character Virtue

Our first theoretical influence is the Jubilee Centre's neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. Thus far in this paper, we have defined neighborliness as a civic character virtue in alignment with this framework, and we continue to center it as our focal theoretical vantage. As a civic character virtue, neighborliness is an acquired disposition–an attribute that informs a person's motivation and guides their conduct toward a common good. Within the Jubilee *Framework*, civic virtues are characterized by service, volunteering, and community awareness (Jubilee Centre, 2022). By framing neighborliness as a civic virtue, we emphasize its value beyond the individual. It is not

simply the cheerful greetings of neighbors on the sidewalk, but a moral good that contributes to the flourishing of the student *and* the community.

Neighborliness as a Characteristic of Context

Our second theoretical viewpoint conceptualizes neighborliness not just as a personal trait, but as a characteristic of the developmental system itself. We draw here on Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) metatheory, which rejects the reductionist split between person and environment (Overton, 2015; Lerner, et al, 2023). From an RDS perspective, character is not a possession of the individual, but rather a dynamic, "coactive" process of a person engaging with their context (Lerner & Callina, 2014; Nucci, 2017). As Callina and colleagues (2019) demonstrated in their study of West Point cadets, character structure is inherently context-specific. The attributes required to function as a moral agent in a military academy differ from those required in a civilian research university. Similarly, neighborliness at Illinois is defined by the specific coactions between our students and the unique history and demographics of Urbana-Champaign.

In this view, neighborliness is a system of "mutually beneficial relations" (Lerner et al, 2023) between the student, their classmates, their instructors, their campus, and the members of the community. One cannot be neighborly in a vacuum; they can only be neighborly in relation to other people. Consequently, our project does not aim merely to "boost" the character virtue of neighborliness, but to alter the system of neighborly relations between students, faculty, campus, and the community. When we speak of neighborliness in this sense, we are describing a state of the *system*—a campus culture where the bidirectional exchanges between university and community are marked by mutual care, compassion, and respect. This shifts the focus of our future evaluation from solely the individual student to the intersection of student, campus, and

community. We acknowledge that the context (i.e., Illinois) must provide affordances for neighborliness to emerge.

Neighborliness as a Goal and an Intentional Act

This relational view can sometimes leave researchers and educators at a standstill. If neighborliness is a feature of the system, what role does each member of that system play in changing it? We address this question with our third theoretical pillar: self-regulation. We adopt the definition of self-regulation provided by Inzlicht and colleagues (2021) and elaborated by Napolitano and colleagues (2024): "the dynamic process of determining a desired end state and taking action to move toward it while monitoring progress along the way."

From a self-regulatory perspective, neighborliness is not just a state of being, but a state of *doing*. Neighborliness is a goal-directed, self-regulatory act. For a student to be neighborly—especially in communities new to them or in a challenging environment—they must engage in "intentional self-regulation" (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2008). This involves the *selection* of neighborly goals (e.g., "I will get to know the permanent residents on my street"), the *optimization* of resources to achieve them (e.g., attending a neighborhood association meeting), and *compensation* when those goals are blocked (e.g., finding a new way to contribute if a volunteer event is canceled; Freund & Baltes, 2002; Napolitano et al., 2024).

Neighborliness requires what Heckhausen and colleagues (2010) term "primary control"—the agency to shape one's environment. As a self-regulatory challenge, neighborliness can be difficult to attain. It can require the suppression of immediate self-interest in service of a longer-term communal goal. This perspective aligns with our focus on the "Labor" figure in the Alma Mater statue: neighborliness is not passive. It is an active, regulatory "work" performed by the student to align their behaviors with their moral ideal.

Neighborliness as a Skill

Our fourth and final theoretical pillar bridges the gap between abstract virtue and concrete action: the science of social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) skills. While character virtues describe *what* a person does consistently, the skills perspective asks *how well* a person can do it. Drawing on the Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI) framework (Soto, Napolitano, & Roberts, 2021; Soto et al., 2022), we conceptualize neighborliness as a composite of specific, malleable capacities.

We define SEB skills as "capacities to maintain social relationships, regulate emotions, and manage goal- and learning-directed behaviors" (Napolitano et al., 2021). The distinction here is between *traits* (typical performance; what one tends to do) and *skills* (maximal performance; what one is capable of doing). A student may not have the *trait* of Extraversion (a tendency to be outgoing), but they can learn the *skill* of Social Engagement (the capacity to initiate conversation with a neighbor).

Neighborliness, in this framework, aligns most closely with the BESSI domain of Cooperation Skills. Specifically, we posit that neighborliness relies on the capacity for *Perspective-Taking* (understanding a neighbor's needs), *Capacity for Trust* (assuming the best of community members), and *Social Warmth* (the ability to put others at ease) (BESSI, 2023). Furthermore, neighborliness in a diverse environment requires Innovation Skills, specifically *Cultural Competence* (the capacity to understand and appreciate different backgrounds), and Self-Management Skills, such as *Responsibility Management* (fulfilling commitments to the community; Soto et al., 2021).

Beyond describing core social, emotional, and behavioral components of neighborliness, the skills perspective also offers a crucial developmental pathway. We do not expect students to

arrive at Illinois as paragons of neighborly virtue. By framing neighborliness as a set of skills to build toward virtuosity, we embrace neighborliness as a journey sometimes characterized by fits and starts. A student who fails to act neighborly is not necessarily suffering from a character defect; they may simply lack the developed capacity for *Perspective-Taking* or *Social Warmth* in this specific context. Moreover, skills are trainable. As Napolitano and colleagues (2021) argue, adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods for SEB skill development due to the neurobiological plasticity and social role transitions occurring during this time. The "Alma Project" treats neighborliness as a capacity to be practiced, refined, and eventually mastered.

Synthesis: From Capacity to Posture

How do we integrate these four distinct theoretical viewpoints into a coherent pedagogical strategy? We propose a cascading model: **SEB skills** provide the capacity (the "can do"); **Self-Regulation** provides the agentic force (the "doing"); **RDS** provides the context (the ("where"); and **Virtue** provides the moral compass (the "why").

To operationalize this integration, we return to the iconography of the *Alma Mater* and the philosophical concept of a "posture." In virtue epistemology, Baehr (2013; 2021) describes a virtue not merely as a cognitive faculty, but as a "personal orientation" or "posture" toward a specific good. A posture is a characteristic way of positioning oneself in relation to the world; it is a "stance" that one takes up volitionally. While a skill (like perspective-taking) is a neutral capacity that can be used for manipulation or empathy, a *posture* is the intentional orientation of that skill toward a moral end. It is, fundamentally, a choice—a way to hold oneself in relation to others that signals openness, care, and readiness to act.

We leverage this concept to link capacity with character. A student may possess the *skill* of social awareness (capacity) but lack the *virtue* of neighborliness (trait). The bridge between

the two is **posture**. By teaching students to adopt a "neighborly posture," we are asking them to voluntarily assume a stance of compassion and respect, even if it does not yet feel natural. This aligns with an Aristotelian habituation model but adds immediate agency. The student may not yet *be* fully neighborly, but they can choose to *stand* neighborly.

We have built this theoretical link deeply into our project. We do not simply ask students to "be good." Rather, we ask them to adopt Alma's stance: stepping off the pedestal, arms open, oriented toward the community. This heuristic transforms abstract ethics into a tangible self-regulatory goal. The "posture," then, is the conscious, agentic act of deploying SEB skills in service of neighborliness. It is the volitional commitment that transforms a "can do" into a "will do," bridging the gap between possessing the capacity for neighborliness and the daily practice of living it.

Summary

In this paper, we introduced the "Alma Project," a proposed program for civic character education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The project aims to cultivate the character virtue of "neighborliness," defined as "compassion, care, and respect for all those in one's community," among the university's large and diverse student body. The program is structured around *The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools*.

To help students "catch" neighborliness, the project leverages the iconic Alma Mater statue, reinterpreting her open-armed stance as a "neighborly posture" that invites community engagement. This visual heuristic provides a shared cultural touchstone for students from varied backgrounds. To ensure neighborliness is "taught," the project integrates with the university's existing We CU service-learning program, embedding character development into courses across disciplines. Finally, to encourage students to "seek" neighborliness, the program incorporates

structured reflection activities that connect civic engagement to students' personal and professional goals, fostering a stronger sense of beyond-the-self purpose within them.

Theoretically, the paper integrates four perspectives to define neighborliness: as a civic character virtue; as a relational characteristic of the campus-community system; as a self-regulatory goal; and as a set of malleable social, emotional, and behavioral skills. The concept of "posture" serves as a unifying mechanism, linking the capacity for neighborliness (skill) to the intentional choice to enact it (virtue). By combining these theoretical insights with practical, scalable interventions, the Alma Project offers a replicable model for fostering civic character in large public research universities.

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