



From Vision to Practice: Integrating the Caught, Taught, and Sought Model through the Canyon Center for Character Education

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Introduction

Established in 2022 through the generous support of the Kern Family Foundation, Grand Canyon University's Canyon (GCU) Center for Character Education (CCCE) is committed to advancing a national movement centered on character formation. Grounded in the belief that character education fosters ethical behavior, personal integrity, academic achievement, and civic engagement (Mawaddah et al., 2025), the CCCE works to elevate character as a cornerstone of both educational practice and societal well-being. The Center promotes virtue development across PK–12 schools, educational leadership programs, and the broader educational landscape. By fostering cultures that support human and societal flourishing through the development of virtue, CCCE's mission and vision serve as guiding pillars in advancing this transformative goal.

The CCCE's overarching mission is to encourage human and societal flourishing by shaping transformative leaders, supporting professionals to advocate for the common good, and to advance character education, virtue formation, and practical wisdom. The Center's vision is to promote societal flourishing, cultures of virtuous character, and responsible stewardship via dynamic partnerships with communities and leaders, infusing character education across learning environments.

In support of this mission and vision, the CCCE developed its *Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character* to guide schools and organizations. The framework has three main components to guide this focus. The *Individual Learning* component guides readers to consider how one develops their own character, models behavior, and engages in self-reflection and growth. The *Leading a Community with Character* component supports participants in creating shared missions, values, and language, leadership that fosters character across a community, while building positive relationships. The *Serving with Character* component aids in putting character into action, service, and citizenship with explicit teaching and opportunity to learn. The principal theme, is one in alignment with the Jubilee Center for Character and Virtue's notion that character is conceived as being *Caught, Taught, and Sought* (Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues, 2022). According to the Jubilee Center for Character and Virtue, character is *Caught* via modeling virtuous behavior and the ethos; it is *Taught* explicitly through instruction or curriculum; it should be *Sought as* students engage in reflection and development themselves through opportunities to practice (character.org, 2021).

In alignment with the Center's framework, the CCCE provides professional learning resources intended for educators and school leaders to utilize. All resources and materials developed by the CCCE aim to provide practical guidance to educational practitioners for adaptation and implementation in a variety of contexts. These resources empower educators and school leaders to build cultures of character that are both contextually grounded and research informed.

Resources

The Canyon Center for Character Education (CCCE) provides a comprehensive suite of resources designed to support the cultivation of cultures of character within educational contexts.

These resources encompass professional learning opportunities, including courses and workshops, which equip educators and school leaders with evidence-informed strategies for the intentional integration of virtue into teaching, leadership, and school culture. In addition, the CCCE offers adaptable curricular materials, such as the *Activities and Applications: Character Education Book*, alongside a Professional Learning Network that provides access to articles, multimedia content, and facilitated discussion forums. Anchored in the *Caught, Taught, and Sought* framework, these resources emphasize and support educators in the modeling of virtuous behavior, explicit instruction, and reflective engagement, thereby bridging theoretical foundations with practical application across PK–12 learning environments.

Character Education in Higher Education: Insights and Innovations from Grand Canyon University's Canyon Center for Character Education Book

The *Character Education in Higher Education* book offers a comprehensive and research-informed exploration of how virtue formation can be intentionally integrated into university life. Grounded in the work of the Canyon Center for Character Education (CCCE) at Grand Canyon University, the book presents a case for the role of higher education in shaping not only the intellect but also the moral and civic character of students. Drawing from Aristotelian virtue ethics, the authors, Dr. Ashley Brandon and Emily Farkas, highlight that universities are uniquely positioned to cultivate moral, civic, intellectual, performance, and theological virtues during the developmental stage of emerging adulthood- a period marked by identity exploration and purpose-seeking.

The book is structured around four key sections: Key Concepts, Approaches, Strategies, and Research. It begins by defining character through a neo-Aristotelian lens, emphasizing the importance of virtues, including the meta-virtue of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. The concept of virtue literacy, which encompasses virtue knowledge, perception, and reasoning, and is foundational to ethical development, is also introduced. From there, the book outlines the CCCE's *Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character*, which includes three pillars- Individual Learning, Leading a Community with Character, and Serving with Character- designed to foster a university-wide focus on virtue.

Practical strategies are offered for embedding character education across curricular and co-curricular contexts, including the use of the “Caught, Taught, and Sought” model and seven evidence-based strategies for virtue development (Lamb et al., 2021). The book also addresses the integration of character education in online learning environments and the ethical use of AI in higher education. Resources such as professional development guides, student courses, and tools for moral dilemma analysis (ex., the ICED framework) are provided to support implementation.

Ultimately, the book places character education as essential to the mission of higher education and calls on educators, administrators, and institutions to move beyond transactional models of education and toward a vision of holistic student development.

Activities and Applications: Character Education Book

The *Activities and Applications: Character Education* book offers a practical, research-based resource designed to help educators integrate character education into PK-12 classrooms.

Authored by experienced individuals in the field, ranging from education college deans, principals, consultants, professors and teachers, along with CCCE Program Director Emily Farkas and Assistant Director Dr. Ashley Brandon, the book provides a collection of structured activities aimed at fostering the development of moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues among students.

The book is grounded in the three components of the CCCE's *Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character*, which emphasizes how character development can be "caught, taught, and sought". As outlined in the book, readers are provided with five actionable steps to developing and enhancing one's own character through reflection and growth opportunities; five actionable steps to leading a community with character at the foundation through relationships, shared values and language, comprehensive integration, training and evaluation; and five steps for serving others through modeling, teaching and providing opportunities for practice. For each actionable step, there are a range of activities and workshops for individuals, for educator professional developments, and for grade level specific classroom lessons to be used. To help guide readers, all activities include symbolic icons to represent which actionable steps they align to and include aligning resources and handouts. All activities, aligned to the CCCE framework, highlight the importance of modeling virtuous behavior (caught), explicit instruction in virtues (taught), and encouraging personal reflection and growth (sought). By aligning with this framework, model, and providing actionable steps, the book ensures that character education is not only theoretical but also actionable and impactful in the classroom setting.

Each activity in the book was meticulously designed with clear objectives, materials lists, step-by-step procedures, and guidance on when to utilize each activity with appropriate grade levels in mind. Educators can utilize these activities to facilitate reflective journaling, virtue goal setting, and discussions that encourage students or colleagues to contemplate the kind of individuals they aspire to become. Recognizing the diverse needs of educators, the book is designed for flexibility and adaptability. While primarily aimed at PK-12 educators, the activities can be modified for use in higher education settings or professional development programs. Additionally, at the end of the book is a curated book list for PK-12 schools to support teaching of the virtues. These books were selected to inspire meaningful conversations and promote the development of character among students. The list is categorized by grade level and further by virtue type explored through the content: moral, civic, performance, and intellectual. The resource is available for free download on the CCCE website, with printed copies offered upon request, making it an accessible tool for educators seeking to enrich their teaching practices with character education.

Development

The development of the *Activities and Applications: Character Education* book was undertaken as a strategic and collaborative endeavor. The CCCE team initially created a detailed outline delineating specific sections, objectives, and conceptual ideas for the project. Subsequently, ten colleagues from the broader character education network were invited to contribute, with all authors participating in a kickoff meeting to receive an overview of the project, associated deadlines, and the foundational frameworks guiding the work. The collaborative team brought a diverse range of expertise, with all members affiliated with or possessing knowledge of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and/or the Center for Character and Citizenship at the

University of Missouri, St. Louis. Authors were assigned sections, deadlines, and peer reviewers at the start of the project. As each section was drafted and peer-reviewed, the CCCE team provided additional feedback to help guide creation. Regular check-ins and open session meetings were maintained throughout the contracted period to support contributors and address questions. Upon completion of all drafts and reviews, the CCCE team organized the content, composed introductions, and submitted materials to the Grand Canyon University marketing team for copy approval. The GCU marketing team designed the final materials, which were subsequently reviewed by the CCCE team for accuracy, organization, and alignment with framework icons. The final product was ultimately published in print and made available online via the CCCE website.

Several key lessons emerged from this development process. Clearly outlining specific requirements, expectations, and deadlines proved critical to supporting contributors' success. Regularly scheduled check-ins and multi-modal communication of directions were also essential. The diversity of contributors' experiences yielded a wide range of activities and formats, enhancing the adaptability of the materials for various audiences, which was an unanticipated but positive outcome. Feedback from the established CCCE advisory board following publication highlighted the need for a table of contents, emphasizing that projects of this magnitude benefit from continuous input from the broader character education community. Finally, the project originated from direct requests by schools seeking immediately applicable resources. While this book successfully addresses a gap and has become a widely utilized CCCE resource, it is explicitly not a standalone curriculum, reflecting the CCCE team's philosophy that character education is context-specific to each school community rather than a prescriptive program.

Professional Development

The CCCE offers a variety of professional learning opportunities designed to cultivate virtuous leadership and teaching across educational settings. Professional development that emphasizes virtuous leadership and teaching not only enhances instructional quality but also empowers educators to lead with integrity, purpose, and a commitment to student flourishing (Ghamrawi, et. al., 2024). These programs are grounded in evidence-based practices, research, and theory.

Leading with Virtue for PK-12 Educators

This multi-course program is tailored for PK-12 educators and leaders seeking to integrate character education into their teaching practices. Each course comprises six focused topics, encompassing areas such as virtue-based leadership, ethical decision-making, the caught, taught and sought model, and community building. Each topic includes a short video based on research and theory, a reflection activity, a practical application page putting content in applicable implementation, and references and resources to explore. Participants engage in immersive experiences and research-backed strategies, equipping them with practical tools to foster human flourishing within their academic environments.

Faithfully Leading with Virtue for Faith-Based PK-12 Educators

Designed specifically for educators in faith-based PK-12 institutions, this program builds upon the foundational principles of the *Leading with Virtue* series, incorporating elements of Christian

worldview and theological principles. It emphasizes the integration of faith and virtue in educational leadership, providing participants with strategies to cultivate character and ethical conduct in alignment with their religious values.

Leading with Virtue: Strategies for Higher Education

This program extends the principles of character education to the higher education context, addressing the unique challenges and opportunities within postsecondary institutions. It offers strategies for fostering ethical leadership, promoting civic engagement, developing reflective practices among faculty and staff, and extending to classrooms online and in-person. Participants engage in reflective activities that facilitate the application of virtue ethics to academic leadership and institutional culture. Topics include background on character education, the caught, taught and sought model, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and character development, and the virtuous educator/leader. The courses provide engaging videos, reflective activities, practical tools for implementing in different disciplines, and references and resources to further explore.

Webinar Series for Higher Education Faculty and Staff

The CCCE also offers a series of webinars aimed at higher education faculty and staff, providing accessible, bite-sized learning experiences on topics related to character education and leadership. These webinars feature expert speakers and cover a range of subjects, including the interconnectivity of faith and character, virtue ethics, ethical decision-making, and the integration of character education into curriculum and institutional practices.

Collectively, these professional learning opportunities aim to equip educators and leaders across various educational settings with the knowledge and skills necessary to cultivate virtuous leadership and foster environments conducive to human and societal flourishing, in line with the caught, taught, sought model.

Educator Facing Tools

The CCCE provides educator-facing tools designed to integrate character education and virtue formation across diverse educational contexts. Research shows that providing educators with targeted instructional resources and professional learning opportunities significantly enhances their ability to integrate character education into standards-aligned curricula, fostering both academic and ethical development in students (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2021). These resources are grounded in the CCCE's *Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character*, which emphasizes the development of individual and communal virtues through intentional instruction, modeling, and reflection.

Videos on Character Education and Virtues

On the CCCE's website (charactered.gcu.edu), school leaders and educators have access to a curated library of training videos designed to support the integration of character education across diverse educational settings. These videos provide foundational knowledge on the nature and importance of virtues, offer practical strategies for embedding character formation into daily instruction, and showcase real-world examples of character education in action. By serving as both instructional tools and reflective resources, the videos empower educators to foster ethical

development, build positive school cultures, and promote human flourishing. Whether used in professional development sessions, staff meetings, or individual learning, these resources are instrumental in translating theory into practice and advancing the mission of character-centered education.

Practical Guidance Documents

The CCCE offers a range of practical guidance documents that provide strategies for teaching virtue in various educational settings. These guidance documents provide ideas for developing virtue with short descriptions and linked examples. The documents provide simple, go-to options for practical application. For PK–12 educators, the document has strategies for integrating character education into classroom instruction (organized by grade level bands), fostering an environment where students can develop virtues such as integrity, responsibility, and respect.

For PK–12 leaders, guidance is provided on creating school cultures that support character development, including professional learning ideas, whole school approaches, and resources for engaging parents. For individuals in the professions, the resource is available to help professionals incorporate character education into their practice, emphasizing the importance of virtues in professional conduct. They are given ideas for developing core values, community relationship building strategies, and practicing virtue in a community setting. For practitioners in higher education, the practical guidance document explores the integration of character education into higher education curricula, preparing students for ethical decision-making in their future careers. Resources are linked throughout the document.

In addition to its educator-facing tools, the CCCE offers a guidance document focused on developing virtues in the context of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI). This resource encourages educators to consider how character formation can be meaningfully integrated into digital learning environments, emphasizing the ethical use of AI and the cultivation of virtues such as intellectual honesty, curiosity, and discernment.

The Thrive Through Character Education Booklet

This book is a comprehensive resource for individuals seeking to deepen their understanding and practice in character education. It includes a variety of informational flyers, such as “*What is Character Education*” and “*The Real Impact of Character Education*.” Each resource is accompanied by an explanation of how to use the resource and reflective questions designed for individual and group use.

Beyond informational content, the book features explanations of interactive activities that encourage users to apply character education principles in real-world educational contexts. These activities are designed to foster meaningful engagement with virtue formation, helping educators translate theory into practice. Whether used in workshops, classrooms, or leadership meetings, the materials support a holistic approach to character development- one that integrates knowledge, reflection, and action to cultivate ethical and compassionate learning environments.

The ICED Approach to Moral Dilemmas

The ICED approach is a community discussion guide designed to enhance character-based decision-making. "*An Approach to Moral Dilemmas: ICED*" provides a structured framework designed to guide individuals and communities through the process of ethical decision-making. The ICED model emphasizes reflective practice and community dialogue to cultivate moral reasoning and practical wisdom. The model guides participants through four steps. First, *Identify*- recognize the ethical issue at hand, including the conflicting virtues, stakeholders involved, and relevant laws or policies. Next, *Connect*- relate the situation to personal experiences, biases, and values, considering how these influence potential actions. Following, *Explore*- examine the dilemma by understanding the emotions, virtues, and perspectives of all parties, evaluating the pros and cons of possible actions, and considering the broader impact on the community. Lastly, *Determine*- decide on the most ethical course of action, reflecting on how the decision aligns with personal and professional values and contributes to human and societal flourishing.

The ICED framework is intended for use in various settings, including educational institutions, community organizations, and professional environments. It serves as a tool for facilitating discussions on ethical dilemmas, promoting inclusivity and equity, and fostering a collaborative approach to decision-making. The document also provides guiding questions to support the implementation of the framework in practice. This approach fosters character development and the cultivation of practical wisdom as both are ongoing processes that are strengthened through reflection, dialogue, and experience. This approach empowers individuals to gain understanding, perspective, and greater wisdom through reflection and practice. Collectively, these resources offer educators the tools necessary to foster environments that promote human and societal flourishing through virtue formation.

Adaptation and Implementation

The resources and tools provided by the CCCE are designed to support educators in the deliberate implementation of character education and the broader promotion of human flourishing within educational settings. These materials encompass a diverse array of content and instructional strategies, which, while universally grounded in principles of virtue and ethical development, are intended to be thoughtfully adapted to the specific context of a school community. This approach aligns with Kristjánsson's (2024) claim that effective character education must be context-sensitive, recognizing the cultural, social, and developmental diversity of students. He emphasizes the role of *practical wisdom* (phronesis) in tailoring virtue formation to meet the unique needs of learners, thereby ensuring relevance and impact across varied educational environments.

For instance, the curated *Activities and Applications: Character Education* book list serves as a valuable resource for identifying literature that not only exemplifies virtues but also reflects the experiences of multicultural student populations, thereby fostering inclusivity and representation in character education. Ezell and Daly (2023) support this strategy, observing that multicultural literature plays a critical role in honoring students' multiple identities and promoting ethical reflection through culturally responsive pedagogy.

Similarly, the practical guidance documents provide educators with a range of activities that can be tailored to students' developmental stages, cognitive abilities, and diverse learning styles,

enabling differentiated instruction that is both accessible and effective. Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019) found that differentiated instruction, when applied thoughtfully, enhances both academic and character outcomes by meeting learners where they are and supporting growth in personalized ways.

Additionally, the videos and professional learning opportunities offered by the CCCE engage educators through multiple modalities of learning, facilitating immediate application of concepts within classroom and school contexts. This multimodal approach supports adult learning principles and reinforces the translation of theory into practice. Collectively, these resources are designed to be both theoretically grounded and pragmatically useful, offering educators actionable strategies that can be implemented with immediacy and flexibility to enhance the moral and social development of students.

Challenges and Influence

As a relatively new Center within a Christian university, situated in a state where character education is not widely implemented in PK-12 schools, developing collaboration and partnerships has proven challenging. The Center team engaged in continuous outreach, maintaining persistence through communication and sharing opportunities for engagement through free resources and professional learning experiences. Initial meetings with school leaders often failed to progress, largely due to the ambiguity surrounding the concept of character education, hesitation among secular public schools to partner with a Christian university Center, and the influence of current sociopolitical dynamics within the state. Nevertheless, the team's persistence coupled with the provision of complimentary resources and professional development hours gradually facilitated greater receptivity. As schools began to engage and recognize the broader aims of character education, they expressed appreciation for the ongoing support and contextualized resources provided by the Center, viewing them as a valuable contribution to their educational communities.

Similarly, within the university context, efforts to build collaboration across the ten colleges and various departments presented parallel challenges. Many faculty members initially questioned the relevance of character development within their discipline-specific practices, expressed limited time to engage, or overlooked communications amid high volumes of institutional correspondence and opportunities. Continued, targeted outreach that emphasized adaptability of resourced, the availability of professional development hours earned based on attendance, and the empirical foundation of the Center's materials proved effective in enhancing engagement. Once individuals connected either in professional learning opportunities or through resource integration, they recognized the alignment between character development and their own disciplinary values or Christian beliefs. Many further acknowledged the research-informed materials and the practical utility of the resources in enriching both teaching and learning. Some even noted the renewed purpose in their roles through the integration of character education. Reflecting on challenges and influences, internally and externally, emphasizes the importance of sustained, relational engagement and the strategic framing of character education as both evidence-based and contextually adaptable (Kristjánsson, 2024).

Conclusion

The Canyon Center for Character Education (CCCE) and what it provides represents a comprehensive and research-informed approach, dedicated to the cultivation of virtue and the advancement of character education across PK–12 and higher education contexts. Through its extensive resources, including professional learning opportunities, practical guidance documents, the *Activities and Applications: Character Education Book*, the *Thrive Through Character Education* resource, the ICED approach for moral deliberation, curated book lists, and multimedia content, CCCE equips educators, leaders, and communities to intentionally foster individual and communal character development. Grounded in the Caught, Taught, and Sought framework, these offerings collectively ensure that character education is modeled through observable behaviors (caught), explicitly instructed through structured tools and strategies (taught), and actively internalized through reflective engagement, opportunities for practice, and application (sought). In doing so, the Center provides a coherent, adaptable, and evidence-based pathway for embedding virtue into educational practice, ultimately supporting human and societal flourishing through the intentional cultivation of character.

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