

CHARACTER CATALYST GRANT • PRACTICAL OUTPUT

Building a Culture of Character for Staff: The Leadership and Character Certificate Program at Wake Forest University

A practical guide covering the program itself, what our early data is telling us, and how another institution could build something similar.

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Section 1 • The Program at Wake Forest

Where It Started

Many character education programs in higher education focus on students and faculty. In his chapter in *Cultivating Virtue in the University*, Wake Forest philosophy professor Christian Miller raised a different question: what about the staff who shape institutional culture every single day? Staff are often long-term foundations of a university and may spend decades at the same institution. Additionally, staff can be powerful influences on the character of students and the culture of the institution, whether they are an academic advisor meeting with a struggling student, a facilities manager setting the tone for a building, an admissions officer shaping who feels welcome on campus, or an HR director writing policies that make people feel valued or invisible.

That question became the thesis for Kathleen Stimely's MA in Character Education at the Jubilee Centre: could a structured, discussion-based program actually cultivate virtues like gratitude, purpose, and practical wisdom among university employees? A four-week pilot discussion group at Wake Forest tested it. The call for participants filled in thirty minutes, and participants said they had never had space to reflect on character in their professional roles. That response, together with a Character Catalyst Grant from the Jubilee Centre and Kern Family Foundation, is what let the pilot become the Leadership and Character (L&C) Certificate Program.

What a Participant Experiences

The program is designed to be inclusive and low-barrier:

- Eight 90-minute workshops, led by Program staff and invited facilitators, once a month over lunch
- A short reflection assignment after each session, connecting the workshop back to the participant's own role
- Open to all faculty and staff, in any role, at no cost
- A certificate earned at completion, celebrated at a year-end event

Learning Outcomes:

The certificate's six learning outcomes — understanding the foundations of character development, applying character-centered leadership, integrating character into professional practice, promoting dialogue across differences, cultivating reflective practice, and advancing institutional character — are grounded in Lamb, Brant, and Brooks' research on strategies for character development, and shaped by Wake Forest's own strategic language

on leaders of character and civil discourse. They drive which topics the program covers and how sessions are sequenced.

Workshops:

Topics span a wide range: from Michael Lamb grounding participants in the research foundations of character development, to an ethical decision-making framework applied to real workplace dilemmas, to a Lego Serious Play session where participants build a representation of their year in virtue, to the VIA Character Strengths framework, to sessions on teamwork, trust, and dialogue across difference. That range signals that character isn't a niche topic for academics, it's relevant to every kind of work on campus.

170+

faculty and staff enrolled before a waitlist was needed

57

departments and units represented across campus

What's Changing for Participants

The clearest early signal of change has come from participants' own reflections and stories, well before any formal survey data:

A colleague from the campus radio station said yes to the program for the chance to learn alongside Wake Forest faculty and share the experience with staff from across the university. What she enjoyed most, she says, was connecting with colleagues from other departments and hearing perspectives that broadened her own thinking.

That shift shows up in how she works, too. She describes becoming “more thoughtful and deliberate,” and now sets aside time to reflect intentionally on the problems and processes in front of her before deciding how to move forward — a habit she says helps her “uncover deeper and more effective solutions.” Asked what character at work looks like for her now, she points to “bringing integrity, thoughtfulness, and a genuine sense of purpose” to the job each day.

A grant manager who described herself as working “a bit on an island” began intentionally initiating conversations and building cross-departmental collaborations around grant opportunities. In her words: “When people come together to work on a proposal, you get glimpses of how deeply they care about their work... applying for a grant can become not just a task but a kind of collective affirmation of purpose.”

A colleague from Campus Life said the program made her feel “more valued and more invested in by Wake Forest University.” Across roles, participants describe slowing down before decisions or finally having language for something they were already trying to do.

Continuing the Momentum

To sustain momentum after the certificate, the Program, under the leadership of Cristy Guleserian, Executive Director for L&C in the College, launched Communities of Impact, which moves graduates from learning together to acting together. More than 75 faculty and staff completed the 2025–26 certificate; 47 of them, representing 31

departments, self-selected into six ongoing communities organized around their area of work: Organizational Leadership & Strategy, Teaching & Academic Programs, Student Experience & Formation, Advancement/Communications & External Engagement, Operations/Finance & Institutional Support, and Workplace Culture & Staff Development. Each community is built around the classic Community of Practice framework: Domain (what brings us together), Community (how we connect and build trust), and Practice (what we actually create together) and is guided by two graduate “steward” volunteers plus a Program partner who serves as a thought partner. Communities meet two to three times a semester, have a small operating budget, and aim to produce something concrete over the year (a new partnership, process, resource, or framework) to showcase each spring.

Cristy Guleserian's team is also sustaining momentum through a Departmental Grant program, which gives certificate graduates and their departments funding to bring character-focused work back into their own units rather than keeping it centered in the Program. The first cycle drew strong interest: 19 departments applied, and 7 grants awarded for initiatives ranging from leadership retreats to curriculum and mentoring programs, another signal of how far the demand has spread beyond the certificate cohort itself.

Section 2 • What the Data Is Telling Us

Data collection was conducted by Becky Park, Director of Research and Assessment and Susan Fesperman, Research Program Manager and analysis conducted by Becky Park, Director of Research and Assessment under IRB00026040.

Assessment was built into the certificate program from the start, using an in-house measure designed around the program's six learning objectives: understanding research-based approaches to character development; connecting leadership theories with character principles; developing tailored approaches to embed character development in daily practice; engaging in dialogue across differences; establishing personal and organizational reflective practices; and collaborating with others to promote institutional character.

Participants completed the measure before their first session and again after completing the certificate. As response rates and interest grew beyond what a small program evaluation required, the Program added two comparison groups: partial completers (people who started but didn't finish) and a waitlist control group. A 6-month follow-up survey was also planned to see how learning is applied over time. The pre/post data below reflects the first formal cohort; the 6-month follow-up and qualitative analysis are still to come.

What the Data Is Telling Us

Our first formal pre/post survey cohort completes this cycle - but we're still in early stages!

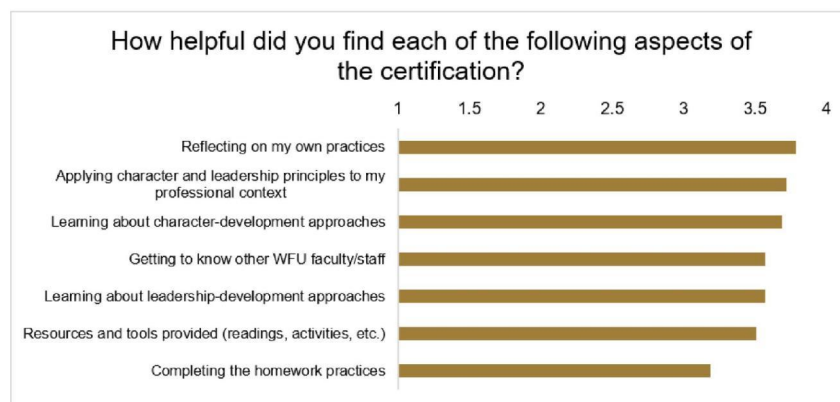
Significant Pre/Post Score Changes	Compared to Partial Completers	Compared to Control participants
Understanding Character Development Foundations Character-Centered Leadership Character in Professional Practice Dialogue Across Differences Reflective Practice Institutional Character	Main effect of time on all LOs. Significant interaction effect on: • Dialogue Across Differences • Reflective Practices Completers had greater effect sizes in pre-post changes	Completers had significantly higher scores at T2 in all learning objectives. Partial Completers had significantly higher scores at T2 in: • Understanding Character Development Foundations • Character-Centered Leadership • Reflective Practice

This program shifted my understanding of character from something I value to something I intentionally practice. It deepened my awareness of my own default patterns and challenged me to lead from virtue rather than instinct. Most importantly, it reframed character as a leadership responsibility: how I show up consistently shapes the experience, trust, and culture of my team.

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In plain terms: certificate completers showed significant, large-effect-size gains across all six learning objectives, and scored significantly higher than both partial completers and control participants on three of the learning objectives at the end of the program. Encouragingly, partial completers also showed gains on nearly every objective, suggesting the program has value even for staff who can't complete every session, though completers' gains were consistently larger.

What the Data Is Telling Us



100% rated the quality of the program as either good (30%) or excellent (70%)!

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Participants also rated every aspect of the certificate (and every individual session) at 3 out of 4 or higher on average. The most helpful elements, by their own ranking, were reflecting on their own practices, applying the principles to their work, and learning about the underlying approaches.

Section 3 • Building This at Your Institution

The elements below are what mattered most for real change in our own experience, offered as a starting sequence, not a rigid template. Each step includes what we'd advise in general, and what it looked like at Wake Forest specifically.

1. Start with your own question.

Articulate the change you'd like to see on your campus before you design anything. This doesn't need to be an institutional mandate, it can start as a genuine, open question.

At Wake Forest: Ours started as a research question, not a mandate: could a discussion-based program cultivate virtues like gratitude, purpose, and practical wisdom among staff?

2. Define your learning outcomes before you design a single session.

This is backwards design: decide what you want participants to think, do, or approach differently by the end, then build the curriculum to get there. Pull from your strategic plan, mission and values, or a climate survey so the outcomes are legible to leadership and not just internally motivated. No survey data? A quick three-question pulse survey can surface it.

At Wake Forest: Our six outcomes came from our research base (the Seven Strategies for Character Development) and Wake Forest's strategic language. They drive which topics we cover and how we sequence them.

3. Pilot small and cheap before building a “program.”

Keep it short, low-cost, and easy to staff with people already on your team. Watch for unmet demand (a fast fill and a waitlist tell you as much as a satisfaction survey) and let participants' own language guide what you build next.

At Wake Forest: Twelve pilot spots filled in thirty minutes. Participants kept saying they'd “never had space to reflect” on character in their work — that phrase became the case for formalizing the program.

4. Secure funding, visible buy-in, and an internal partner.

Budget for space, light refreshments, and facilitator time. Then, the project management underneath: recruiting facilitators, booking rooms, building participant-facing infrastructure, managing enrollment, and running reflection and celebration logistics. Get a senior leader (dean, provost, VP) to publicly endorse the program, and pair it with an internal partner like HR, talent development, or a professional development center so it has an institutional home and a path to continue year over year.

At Wake Forest: A seed grant, paired with our Learning & Development team, let us formalize and scale the pilot.

5. Design around a few deliberate structural choices.

Keep it low-barrier: short sessions, free and open to everyone regardless of role or title, a brief written reflection after each session (this is what turns a one-off workshop into an actual practice, and where the clearest early signal of change shows up), and a simple recognition mechanism at the end. Cap workshop size (we use ~30) to protect a discussion-based format rather than letting it become a lecture.

At Wake Forest: Eight 90-minute workshops, no eligibility requirement, a certificate and annual celebration at the conclusion.

6. Capture what's actually changing.

Track participation broadly, breadth across departments is a strong signal to leadership that the work isn't a niche interest. Read reflection assignments for early, informal signal, and put a pre/post (and ideally 6-month follow-up) survey in place before you scale, so you can show growth rather than just assert it. Collect short participant stories alongside the numbers, they're often the most persuasive evidence for funders and leadership.

***At Wake Forest:** We review reflection assignments informally throughout the year, and layer in a structured pre/post and 6-month follow-up survey for formal data.*

The core takeaway: staff are not a side audience for character work — they are among the most important. This model doesn't require a major overhaul. Discussion-based, reflective, low-barrier programming works outside the classroom, it's replicable by any institution with a character framework and a learning & development function, and the demand is probably already there.

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