

January 2003

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### Recommended Citation

MacElroy, Molly (2003) "Educating for Character: Teaching Values in the College Environment," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 24 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol24/iss1/3>

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# Educating for Character:

## Teaching Values in the College Environment

**Molly MacElroy**

*Be it inside or outside of the classroom, there is a need to provide individuals with an ethical framework by which to live. Family, community members, and teachers all play a role in educating students for character while still in the shadow of their parents. What happens when they leave home for college and enter a world of new responsibility and freedom? In the absence of those who have given students a set of values for guidance, who helps them shape their sense of self? In this article, the author will discuss character education and how student affairs professionals can help students shape their values and sense of self by challenging and supporting them as the personal values students bring to college come into conflict with the values in their new community.*

### Introduction

Think back to the first time that you learned the difference between right and wrong. Who was there to teach you? Was it your parents, extended family members, or teachers? Children learn in many different ways what actions are right and wrong in this world--by observing their parents and siblings, decisions that friends make, and the actions of their role models. Young men and women learn and develop their own character and sense of self from a very early age, but this growth does not stop at any one point in their lives. People of all ages continuously develop their identity by what they see, experience, and reflect on in their environment.

During the first 18 years of their lives, individuals develop morality from the influence of their parents.

Parents are a child's first and most significant shapers of character. If parents do their job well, by high school a young person will know, care about, and practice a set of core values--such as honesty, patience, and compassion. (Schwartz, 2000, A68)

While in early childhood, people are often completely dependent on their parents. As they grow older, children develop their morals, not only from parents, but also from their peers. When a person leaves home and makes the transition to college, many additional figures come into play as they shape their sense of self.

In college, students enter a new world, one in which they are granted more freedom and latitude in decision-making than they knew in high school. Each individual arrives at college with a unique level of self-awareness and knowledge of what is right and wrong. They have grown up in different families, with different life situations, which affect their current and future actions. The fact that parents are no longer looking over their shoulder creates an untested dynamic. They may make mistakes and seek the advice of older, more experienced individuals.

As I reflect on my childhood and adolescence, I was raised with love and support and I realize that my parents had a great deal of influence over my decisions. While I was living at home, the difference between right and wrong always seemed apparent. I had a strong set of values and morals that helped shape my life. Even when my parents were not physically present, it seemed as though they were there to help me through situations that challenged my values.

When I went to college, it was a different story. For the first time in my life, I was truly on my own. I was making decisions, without the help of others, which would affect my life. What made it even more difficult was knowing that every decision I made could affect others. I wondered with whom I would interact and relate in this new stage of my development. How was I going to know what was right and wrong in my new home? I remembered the lessons my parents taught me, but would that be enough to guide me?

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In asking these questions of myself, I was trying to determine who would help me shape my character and sense of self during my undergraduate career. I had a framework of values and standards by which to live, yet faced with new responsibility, this framework was bound to shift and change. In this article, I hope to explore character education and how it is accomplished in the college and university setting. Just as faculty members have curricular goals, student affairs professionals have similar learning objectives in the residence halls, student organization meetings, and on the athletic fields. Student affairs professionals have just as much responsibility in educating students as do professors. The character education of students while in higher education is of great importance if we are to exist as a united community. As Martin Buber (1946) states, "Genuine education of character is genuine education for community" (p. 14).

The historical perspective and definition of character education is important in understanding its rise and fall within colleges and universities. In defining character, I hope to then discuss the concepts of right and wrong in the context of values and morals. With a rise in pluralism in the United States, the questions most often asked regarding character education are, "Whose values or morals are correct and whose should we teach?" I will argue that there are several crucial values we all share, agree upon, and cherish as human beings. How, then, can questioning a student's values, purpose, or place in the world help to develop and shape their moral sense of self? In colleges and universities, students may not always know or understand the right thing to do, so they need something or someone to serve as a moral model while they are developing their own character. Finally, I will address the importance and role of student affairs professionals in the character education of students as they make their way through the academy.

### Historical Perspective

Throughout history, there were rises and declines in the academy's commitment to character education. Lickona (1993) states that "down through history, education has always had two great goals: to help people become smart and to help them become good" (p. 8). The purpose of education has been to enhance the mind, to discover greater things, and to leave the world better for those who follow. College and university mission statements have supported character education since their beginnings, stressing "the development of the capacity to think clearly about moral issues and to act accordingly" (Whiteley, 1998, p. 11). The missions supported the fostering of moral reasoning, which would then transfer to students' actions. Ryan (1993) argues that:

Our founders and early educational pioneers saw in the very diverse, multicultural American scene of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the clear need for a school system that would teach the civic virtues necessary to maintain our novel political and social experiment. They saw the school's role not only as contributing to a person's understanding of what it is to be good, but also as teaching the enduring habits required of a democratic citizen. (p. 16)

Although this statement was written primarily for elementary and secondary educational institutions, it parallels the purpose of college and university mission statements. Educators strive for the same ideals by educating the whole student to become a productive member of society.

In the 20th century, colleges and universities started to move away from educating for character and began to focus on scientific facts and research. "The philosophy of logical positivism, arriving in American universities from Europe, asserted a radical distinction between facts (which could be scientifically proven) and values (which positivism held were mere expressions of feeling, not objective truth)" (Lickona, 1993, p. 6). In this perspective, moral reasoning was seen as "value judgment" and something that was outside the purview of academic institutions. Faculty abandoned character education in favor of scholarly research, and student affairs professionals emerged to bridge this gap for students (A Plan for a New Century Committee as cited in Murray, 1995).

Since the publishing of *The Student Personnel Point of View* in 1937 (NASPA, 1989), the mission of student affairs has been to educate students holistically, which means educating their body, spirit, and mind. Starting in the 1960s, pluralistic thought in the United States increased and debate surfaced as to whose values or morals should be used to educate students. The role of student affairs practitioners conflicted with the climate of the

times surrounding character education. In order to avoid transmitting or promoting a particular set of values or ethics, student affairs professionals assumed a non-directive, value-neutral role with students (Dalton as cited in Murray, 1995).

As diversity in this country continues to grow, the argument about whose values to teach will inevitably persist. I would argue that this is when we need character education the most. As Nicgorski, cited in Ashmore (1991), argues:

The college or university clearly has the opportunity to provide the capstone to character development in the schooling years . . . . Among those pursuing undergraduate education are the future leaders of every sector . . . . Here is the key leverage point for the moral quality of our or any modern society. (p. 107)

With many campuses seeing an increase in bias related incidents, alcohol and drug use, and unprotected sexual activity, it is important to return back to strong character education that helps students make the connection between their thoughts and actions. Blimling (1990) argues that hedonism on campus is the chaos and disorder of students struggling to internalize moral principles and to develop sound character. In a situation such as this, student affairs professionals can step in and be a significant presence of principled people with shared standards that have the power to reshape a person's character (Schwartz, 2000). Student affairs professionals do not necessarily impose their values on others; rather they develop a set of guidelines that encourage students to develop their own set of values to guide their decision-making.

### **Defining Character Through Morals and Values**

Many questions arise within the topic of character education surrounding how to define the word character. The word character is loaded with positive and negative connotations. On its own, character has no assigned value. Yet in contemporary vocabulary, we often associate character with positive behaviors or values, such as truthfulness and fairness. Moral values are attitudes or beliefs that refer to issues of right and wrong in an ethical sense (rather than, for example, a logical or aesthetic sense). They deal, for example, with justice, with fairness, and with social responsibility (Ashmore, 1991, p. 108).

To put it in simpler terms, many consider character to be an understanding of the difference between what is right and what is wrong. Character is knowledge of what constitutes good values, wanting to obtain those values, and then acting on them to perform good deeds (Lickona, 1993). Character is determining the connection between moral reasoning and moral actions. It is establishing the link between what one values and the actions assumed as a result of those principles.

Developing one's character involves a great deal of motivation. What is the point in learning and understanding what good is if we are not going to put that knowledge to use and become good people (Wilson, 1990)? There are many values in the environment that shape an individual. In addition to those environmental standards, the principles one holds help to determine character. The actions that a person assumes while in the absence of others, such as the choice of whether or not to cheat on an exam, expose the true nature of that human being.

Many debate whether the decision to cheat reveals something positive or negative about the spirit of an individual. This and other examples have been challenged regarding the definition of what is right and wrong and in whose eyes. How can we teach something as important as values and character when we cannot agree on what is to be taught?

Right or Wrong: Whose Values are We Teaching?

The first concern most people have is . . . whose values system will be taught? Who is to say what is right and what is wrong? Who are you to tell me or my child what is right or wrong?

-L. Wiley, *Comprehensive Character Building Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers*, 1998

I believe that we can all come up with our own ways of defining the words right and wrong, and also the actions that we associate with them. Yet I wonder, if we put the definitions together, would they match? Could we agree on the meaning long enough to teach others? It is important to open up a dialogue on what constitutes the most influential values.

Certain fundamental truths exist on which all human beings can agree, thus translating into ethical guidelines that we all share. “Such rules as ‘we ought never to lie,’ ‘we ought always to keep our promises,’ and ‘we ought never to execute an innocent person’ constitute a set of valid prescriptions regardless of the outcomes” (Pojman, 1995, p. 136). How many people value lying? Does lying build a stronger character? Do we value keeping promises to others? Is that an important trait within all relationships? Do most people agree that respect for all human beings is extremely important? (Although discrimination still exists, more and more students are being taught that it is unjust and should never have occurred throughout history.)

These values are very different, but throughout each question there is a “thread of unity” or a continuity of thought and action (Eddy, 1959, p. 2). It comes down to asking the question, “How do I want to live and treat other people in this life?”

### **Using “Big Questions” to Develop a Moral Sense of Self**

College is a time of new choices, responsibility, and freedom. As a result, sometimes students’ choices are not always the best for the individual or the situation. Blimling (1990) states, “In the first two years of college, many students experience a period of hedonism that is sometimes interpreted as a lack of character or a lack of moralism” (p. 267). He follows with the suggestion that it is not necessarily a lack of character or moralism; rather it is a conflict with the “relativity of moral principles and the commitment to such principles” (p. 267). Throughout the college experience, students are caught in the middle of the values they have been taught by their family and the values of the new community in which they live. Students internalize what they see their peers and role models doing and make decisions on how to live their own lives. Piaget(1954) has argued that human beings construct meaning out of their experience by filtering it through their meaning-making system or stage of intellectual capacity.

There is a great deal of growth and development that takes place within this context. Students begin to determine their sense of self and who they are in relation to others. The experimenting that takes place gives them the opportunity to explore values and integrate them into their identities. This is a time for the big questions to be asked of oneself: the big existential questions that “touch the core of life itself: who am I, where do I come from, what do I live for, what is my vocation, to what do I devote myself, to what do I commit myself?” (van der Ven, 1998, p. 5). Only by asking these questions can students start to understand and form their moral identity. The “others” perspective is no longer important in determining what is right. An individual asks these questions and uses the answers to come to a conclusion of how to act.

### **Moral Reasoning into Action**

The process of moral reasoning gives rise to an understanding of what is right within the standards individuals set for themselves. Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to ask important life-altering questions of students, including planning programs and activities that help students think about their values and then act upon them. These individuals spend a great deal of time learning about student development theory in order to understand the different stages through which college students develop.

Students traverse many different developmental stages as they enter higher education and make their way through the Academy. At each juncture, a student’s values may come into conflict with the values of his or her environment. This is a point of growth and development that can either be positive or negative. This change forces students to look inward and define further who they are. It also marks a point where student affairs professionals can ask the questions necessary to help students through this developmental process. These conflicts and questions may force students to adopt values new to them and then figure out how to use those values to continue growing.

When student affairs professionals receive feedback on a program or activity planned for students, they expect that students will interpret the experiences differently and reach unique understandings from their peers. Hopefully, students will shape their actions based upon the outcomes that occur in service learning programs or multicultural activities, as well as the interactions they have with their peers as a result of those programs. Through the use of student development theory, student affairs practitioners can challenge students to define values that hold importance to them, then offer support when they put those values into action.

Lawrence Kohlberg, a cognitive-developmental theorist, focused specifically on how people make moral judgments. He saw moral judgments as having three qualities: an emphasis on value rather than fact, an effect on a person(s), and a requirement that an action be taken (Colby, Kohlberg, & Kauffman, 1987).

Kohlberg believed, and was able to demonstrate through studies, that people progressed in their moral reasoning (i.e., in their bases for ethical behavior) through a series of stages. He believed that there were six identifiable stages, which could be more generally classified into three levels. (Barger, 2000, p. 1).

Kohlberg suggested that each level represented a different relationship between the self and society's rules and expectations. Moral reasoning and judgments are important to the growth and development of individuals, especially at an institution of higher education, where a greater sense of responsibility and freedom exist. I believe that student affairs professionals have an obligation to students to use this moral developmental theory to help educate students for sound character, to be healthy, productive members of society.

### **Role of Student Affairs Professionals in Character Education**

Every interaction that students have in their college years affects how they see themselves and how they see others. From their first all-nighter with peers in a residence hall to their first student life sponsored program or lecture challenging their ideas; college is a time that can help shape the person they will become in life. We are always in a process of becoming, a journey if you will. Although students spend a great deal of time and energy in classes and completing assignments, just as much energy is spent managing their time and activities outside of class. Student affairs professionals are in an important and exciting position, given the opportunity to fill some of the out-of-class time with programming that can challenge students to think about their values and identity.

Schweingruber (as cited in Murray, 1995) suggested seven ways that student affairs professionals can promote and facilitate character education:

1. Create an environment of trust and mutual respect on campus.

2. Staff should be free to share their own values with

students; while they cannot impose their values, they also should not appear to be value-less by adopting a value-neutral position.

3. Be as non-legalistic as possible while still working within the confines of the law. Moral development is hampered by an overly legalistic environment.

4. Do not protect students from the consequences of criminal behavior.

5. Allow students to solve the problems they face; practice the art of selective negligence.

6. Support disciplinary sanctions as significant contributors to moral growth.

7. Take advantage of one-on-one time with students.

As faculty members are educators in the classroom, student affairs professionals are educators outside of the classroom. Student affairs professionals must provide the opportunity for students to question the values with which they have been raised and formulate ideas about what values they shall possess and espouse when they leave our institutions. Higher education institutions must provide students with ways to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. A way for this to be accomplished is through constant challenge and support.

The breadth and depth of student affairs professionals work on campus is large and important. They work with students in the residence halls, on the athletic fields, within organizations and clubs, and in the judicial system. There is ample opportunity to reach out and help students develop good character. Each of the seven suggestions listed earlier is a way that the field of student affairs should be reaching out to the students at their institutions.

According to Schweingruber (as cited by Murray, 1995, p. 59) by “creating an environment of trust and mutual respect on campus,” student affairs administrators can create a safe space for students to bring up issues of morality and character. If students develop trust in the administrators, faculty, and staff at their institution, and feel that they will be supported when speaking about student concerns on campus, they may be more inclined to do so. This will help create an environment in which students can speak about actions done by their peers that do not build good character and compromise the safety and security of others.

As Etzioni, cited in Berreth and Scherer (1993), states, “Yes, even when we teach values, children later may abandon them. But you have to give them some values on which to go. It sadly falls on the shoulders of the school” (p. 12). Although I agree with the former part of that sentence, I do not believe that schools should look “sadly” upon the prospect of imparting a set of values to students later in life. As Etzioni says, they may abandon the framework with which they were brought up, yet who better to step in and take the place of parents - than student affairs practitioners who learn a great deal about college student ethical development. Adopting a value-neutral position gives students no moral model during this time of transition. They depend greatly on their peers, who are also making both good and bad decisions.

Within those good and bad decisions that students make are the confines of the legal system. Student affairs professionals have an obligation as members of the administration to uphold the laws of this country. They have an additional obligation to give students the opportunity to make mistakes--and learn from them. A related example in this context is working with students who violate campus alcohol and other drug (AOD) policies.

The choices students make surrounding alcohol and other drugs can influence the path they take in the future. Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to create alternatives to legal action for students who are found in violation of such AOD policies. Many schools offer psycho-educational programs, which group together students found in violation of AOD policies, to focus on the choices that they make in regards to substance abuse. These programs include a great deal of discussion and self-reflection. Within those discussions, student affairs professionals challenge students to think about the decisions they make and how those decisions affect themselves and their community. The programs instill a sense of respect for the campus environment. This is an influential tool in encouraging students to make moral choices to build sound character.

Though student affairs professionals have the opportunity to create alternatives to the legal system, in some instances a more stern approach is most appropriate. Criminal behavior is severe and must have severe consequences. Allowing criminal behavior to go unpunished on our campuses does not seem to be in the best interest of students. Sexual violence among men and women is occurring in increasing amounts on college and university campuses across the country. Allowing these incidents to continue with impunity creates an atmosphere of fear and hatred on campus. What are we teaching students if we do not right such wrong acts? What kind of example are we setting by allowing individuals whose choices lack moral judgment to remain members of a campus community without some form of reprimand? Although this may seem to conflict with the previous paragraph, I believe that there is a continuum on which to gauge criminal acts. In my opinion, choosing to participate in an act, which most directly harms oneself, is less of an offense--less of a violation, than someone who chooses to intentionally violate another individual.

Student affairs professionals have a network of eyes and ears across campus. Rarely does a day go by when they do not learn of the personal issues of students or the policies that they may have violated within the campus walls. Student affairs administrators have the opportunity to intervene in the lives of students to help them solve problems. Yet they also need to be selective of the situations in which they intervene. If part of the job of the division of student affairs on campus is to help students develop into capable adults, it is important to allow students to solve their own problems and navigate difficult situations on their own. In some sense, student affairs administrators must turn their heads the other way to allow students the learning opportunities that come with these experiences. By practicing selective negligence, student affairs professionals can intervene when the situation may pose a threat to a student or the campus, yet remain unengaged when there is an important teachable moment for a student to learn on their own.

Many times it feels as though student affairs administrators are caught in catch-22 situations. While they are in college, students need to be challenged and supported. Sometimes, just a conversation can be challenging enough to have with a student, without any involvement in the disciplinary process. In many instances, students react negatively when the judicial system is strict in its enforcement. Yet within the judicial system, many sanctions can lead to significant moral growth. Sanctions can include aiding building service staff in cleaning up the residence halls on a weekend morning, volunteering at a food shelf, or attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Including a reflection paper at the completion of the sanction can encourage students to look back at their experiences and discuss what they have learned. Using these types of sanctions, and encouraging the entire campus community to support them, can lead to greater moral growth of the students.

Student affairs divisions also use student judicial boards as representatives of the judicial system to handle cases involving violations of campus policies. In these instances, students are evaluated and sanctioned by their peers. The general student population is living in the environment that is affected when one of their peers violates a campus policy, and therefore may be affected by that violation. Who better to assess the actions against campus policies of students within a community than other persons living within that community? By supporting the sanction decisions of student judicial board members, student affairs professionals foster the character development of students responsible for violating policy and those responsible for enforcing that policy. Students are adjudicated and evaluated by their peers who, many times, hold them accountable to higher standards of behavior than administrators. This influences students to think about how their actions affect others within their community.

Student affairs professionals must make every effort to help students determine who they are in relation to others and the kind of person they want to be. They must ask the questions like, “who do I want to become?” “what are the values and limitations of my culture?” and “what do I want the future to look like – for me, for others, for my planet?” (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 137). Each one-on-one interaction with a student can determine his or her future.

## **Conclusion**

During childhood, most children have their parents to help shape their values. They have an idea of what is right and wrong as a result of what they have been taught and what has been displayed to them through interactions with others. Family members, peers, teachers, and other community members all influence who children will become. These people have, metaphorically, been acting as guardian angels through difficult times leading students to the best possible choices.

At different times in our history, schools were approached to take a lead role in educating students for character. The mission statements of such schools were written in a way as to state that educational institutions should “teach the civic virtues necessary to maintain our novel and political experiment” (Ryan, 1993, p. 16). Many character education experts have stated that character education should not just exist in elementary and secondary schools, but also in higher education. They claim that even if students are given a set of values, they might possibly abandon them later in life. Yet, whose values should be taught? Can we all agree on any fundamental truths that form an ethical framework by which to live?



As individuals leave a familiar home and make a new home at college, there are new privileges granted to them. Who will guide students in reshaping the ethical framework with which they have come to college? Who can ask the big questions that will either start a dialogue or help students think differently about the values they have been given and their place in the world? Once the conversation starts, in what way will students know and understand how to use their new perspective and put it into action?

Student affairs professionals can provide beneficial guidance to students as they make their way through the developmental stages of college. By providing programs and activities, they can help students navigate difficult conflicts with their identity, their place among peers in the community, and an unfamiliar ethical framework. Student affairs administrators have a responsibility stated in the doctrines of the profession to educate students holistically. In doing so, they prepare students for life in the real world outside the bubble of college. They ask life-altering questions, getting answers that determine a path for life and shape the framework of values, morals and ethics with which students leave the realm of higher education.

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