

COMMENTARY

MORAL AND CHARACTER EDUCATION
A Ground-Truth Perspective

Richard H. Hersh

Yale University

Years ago when I was vice president for academic affairs at the University of New Hampshire, the director of our Institute for Earth Oceans and Space (EOS) asked me to fund two new positions: a forester and a small skiff helmsman. I was surprised by the request. EOS was world renown for its global satellite data gathering charting such things as ocean warming and current variations, acid rain effects, glacial melt, and water pollution. Why, I asked him, did he need these two positions as opposed to his usual requests for engineers, physicists, biologists, chemists, and ecologists? He politely explained to me that for all of the sophisticated rocketry, satellite technology, and myriad telemetry necessary for global data gathering, he and his colleagues always needed to verify satellite data with “ground-truth” data retrieved by human beings. The forester was needed to walk the forests to check if the satellite data on acid rain, for example, were valid and reliable. The helmsman was needed to go out on the ocean in a small boat and take hand samples of water

identified by global satellites as warmer or more polluted than previous tracking. Reality on the ground, he explained, at times differed from the blue-sky view and was crucial for their analysis.

Francisco Esteban Bara, editor of this issue, has asked me to offer a short, ground-truth perspective regarding “higher education and character development” because, he told me, that I had the global perspective of an academic researcher on these matters, the practical experience of an administrator trying to change college and university curricula and pedagogy, and for the past 6 years the opportunity as a higher education consultant to see firsthand what is actually happening on campuses. I am happy to offer such a view with the caveat that I am speaking primarily about American higher education.

What are we talking about when we use words like “character education?” Various, people use the terms to mean value and moral development to include the acquisition of virtues such as honesty and loyalty, specific attri-

• Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Richard H. Hersh, rhersh@sbeglobal.net

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butes such as perseverance and resilience, and the development of social, emotional, and cognitive capacity enabling taking the perspective of others, promoting fairness, and acting in an ethically principled fashion. The word “education” implies the learning of character as opposed to a singular, predestined biological flowering of such traits and research suggests that moral and character development is significantly influenced by and continuously constructed from birth in the interaction with families, churches, neighborhoods, schools, and colleges and universities and exposure to peers and a variety of media. By the time students enter higher education, they bring with them, by accident or design, the substantial effects of such character and moral education and are confronted by intentional and/or serendipitous opportunities for further such learning on campuses.

Given the increase on U.S. campuses of cheating, alcohol and other drug abuse, racism, homophobia, bullying, date rape, depression, and debilitating stress, there is plenty of moral and character education left for higher education to tackle. But not much has changed since 1999 when Marvin Berkowitz and Michael Fekula in their *About Campus* article “Educating for Character,” concluded that, “there is not enough attention paid to character education in this nation’s institutions of higher learning—either on the part of the campus educators or the general public.”

The campus explanations for so little explicit attention to character education offered today echo those Berkowitz and Fekula referred to as well: faculties are not trained in such matters; students and their parents resist such discussion; it is not the role of the college or university to attend to such matters, and/or there is no room left in curricula squeezed dry in accommodation to more vocational concerns.

Paradoxically, there is increasing talk these days on campuses about character and moral education, partly in response to press and social media attention, partly because the problems mentioned above are taking an unac-

ceptable financial, political, and moral toll, and partly because colleges and universities have begun to realize that like it or not, “higher” education, is inherently a moral enterprise. Indeed, one finds in virtually every institutional mission statement and college catalog a statement of ethical and moral purpose. So far, however, the educational response one finds on most campus visits is a specific course or two or a small program for a relatively few students. Such a response is woefully inadequate because character and moral development is not something that can be acquired solely in a course on ethics and/or 100 hours of community service, and/or signing on to an honor code. Yet on most campuses, character education, orphaned by faculty and administration, is powerfully determined by the peer culture.

At its core, character and moral education is developmental by which I mean the construction or formation of one’s intellectual, moral, emotional, and social identity. At its best, such development is a process that is cumulative and collective in nature requiring intentional, and sustained learning. It is cumulative in that over time—years rather than months—one does not simply acquire or pile on new character attributes as if adding course credits but instead broadens, deepens, and integrates the capacity for authentic commitment to particular values and capacity for ethical behavior. It is collective in nature in that students are immersed in a particular campus moral culture reflected in the expectations, standards, norms, values, and behaviors that the faculty, staff, administration, and ultimately the students *collectively* and purposefully agree to rather than leave such matters to chance. On such a campus, character and moral issues are pervasive, encountered in conversation and reflection in almost all courses be they in history, literature, philosophy, biology, theater, and art. They arise as well outside of classrooms in gender and race relations, residence hall and athletic field behavior, and communication through social media.

It is rare in to find a campus that not only acknowledges the inherent ubiquity of character and moral issues but intentionally shapes its culture through curriculum and pedagogy to purposefully educate for moral and character development in ways that might make a significant difference. I know of no simple curricular or technological shortcuts in the pursuit of such “higher” education and it is therefore heartening to read in this issue a number of case studies that understand the complexity and primacy of such goals and the ability and to pursue them.

REFERENCE

Berkowitz, M. W., & Fekula, M. J. (1999). Educating for character. *About Campus*, 4(5), 17–22.

Dr. Richard Hersh has served as president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges and Trinity College (Hartford), and provost and vice president for academic affairs at The University of New Hampshire and Drake University. He also served as vice president for research and dean of the Graduate School at the University of Oregon and was director of the Center for Moral Education at Harvard University. In his early career he was a high school teacher, professor, and dean of education. For the past 6 years he has served as a senior consultant at Keeling & Associates, a higher education consulting practice. He is currently teaching an undergraduate seminar at Yale University entitled, “Contemporary Challenges to Liberal Education.”



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