



Conference Proceedings

7th Annual Character Convening

Pensacola, Florida

May 11-13, 2026

Edited by Kara M. Chism, EdD



Samford University

Orlean Beeson School of Education

Letter from Editor

Dear Colleagues, Scholars, Practitioners, and Partners,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the official proceedings of the **2026 Character Convening**, held in Pensacola, Florida, from May 11-13, 2026. These proceedings represent the collective scholarship, innovation, and dedication of individuals committed to advancing the understanding and practice of character development across educational, organizational, and community contexts.

The Character Convening brought together researchers, educators, school leaders, nonprofit organizations, and community advocates who share a common vision: fostering environments where character, ethics, and human flourishing are central to personal and collective success. Throughout the conference, participants engaged in meaningful dialogue, examined emerging research, shared effective practices, and explored innovative approaches to cultivating character in diverse settings.

The papers, presentations, and projects included in these proceedings reflect the breadth and depth of work currently shaping the field of character development. Contributors addressed topics ranging from character education and leadership development to the cultivation of virtues that support thriving schools and communities. Together, these works highlight both the enduring importance of character and the evolving strategies used to nurture it in an increasingly complex world.

As editor, I extend my sincere appreciation to all authors, presenters, reviewers, volunteers, and attendees whose contributions made this convening possible. Your commitment to excellence, scholarship, and service has enriched the conversations documented in these pages and has advanced our collective efforts to promote character-driven leadership and learning.

It is our hope that these proceedings will serve not only as a record of the important work shared during the convening but also as a catalyst for future research, practice, and collaboration. May the ideas presented here inspire continued inquiry and action as we seek to cultivate character, strengthen communities, and prepare individuals to lead lives of integrity, purpose, and positive impact.

Thank you for your contributions to this important work and for your dedication to advancing character development in education and beyond.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kara M. Chism, EdD". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kara M. Chism, EdD
Editor, Conference Proceedings
Character Convening 2026

Proposal Review Committee

The success of the 2026 Character Convening would not have been possible without the dedicated service of our Proposal Review Committee. We extend our sincere gratitude to each reviewer for contributing their time, expertise, and thoughtful insights throughout the proposal evaluation process. Their careful consideration of submissions helped ensure a high-quality conference program that reflected the diverse perspectives, innovative research, and evidence-based practices represented in the field of character development. We deeply appreciate their commitment to maintaining scholarly excellence, supporting emerging and established researchers, and advancing meaningful dialogue among educators. Their efforts played a vital role in shaping a conference experience that fostered collaboration, inspired new ideas, and strengthened our collective mission of promoting character and human flourishing. We thank each reviewer for their invaluable contributions and generous service to the Character Convening.

Robin Cayce, Lipscomb University

Mary Lombardo-Graves

Ben White, The University of Alabama

These are conference proceedings from the 7th Annual Character Convening in Pensacola, AL Monday, May 11- Wednesday, May 12, 2026. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without the author's permission.

Table of Contents

Title	Page
Universal Design for Learning: A Framework for Modeling, Teaching, and Practicing Character in the Classroom Hannah Kennedy, Kate Scarborough, and Tarsha Shepard, Samford University	5
Cleared for Takeoff: Character in Action—Leadership Lessons From the Blue Angels Jan Miller and Denise Knight, The University of West Alabama	14
Beyond Isolation: A Protocol in Support of Critical Friendship in Action Lori B. Doyle, Concordia University Irvine, and Kara M. Chism, Samford University	22
Character in Action: Lessons From the Hundred Acre Wood Denise Knight and Jan Miller, The University of West Alabama	30
Bridling Character: Integrating Equine-Assisted Learning and Virtue Ethics in Character Education Mary M. Lombardo-Graves	36
A Character Coaching Model for Student Success and Flourishing Jeana M. Partin, Carson-Newman University	46
Cultivating the Common Good: Transforming the Academic Workplace into a Community of Character Clara Gerhardt and Kara M. Chism, Samford University	55

Universal Design for Learning: A Framework for Modeling, Teaching, and Practicing Character in the Classroom

Hannah Kennedy, PhD, Samford University

Kate Scarborough, PhD, Samford University

Tarsha Shepard, PhD, Samford University

Abstract

As we endeavor to teach, model, and practice character in our classrooms, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a promising, practical way to do so. The three guiding principles of UDL are: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of action/expression. By adopting the principles of UDL, educators proactively plan, implement, and assess in a manner that meets the needs of every learner. This means that we recognize the diverse strengths, preferences, abilities, and challenges of every student. Now more than ever, our students bring with them a vast range of experiences, abilities, talents, and interests. UDL provides an avenue for differentiation and intentional instruction that meets every student where they are. As we consider ways to practically model, teach, and practice strong character in the classroom, UDL offers a practical and effective model. In this article, we will discuss methods for using the Universal Design for Learning framework as a means for developing character in the higher education classroom.

Universal Design for Learning: A Framework for Modeling, Teaching, and Practicing Character in the Classroom

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.” This perspective highlights a foundational purpose of education: preparing individuals not only with the knowledge and skills necessary for success, but also with the character and values needed to contribute positively to society. In today’s classrooms, educators face the challenge of fostering both academic growth and character development among learners with a wide range of experiences, backgrounds, abilities, and needs. As teacher educators, we continually seek effective approaches that support the development of content knowledge while simultaneously cultivating the ethical, interpersonal, and professional qualities that students need to thrive in school, the workplace, and their communities.

Character education has long been recognized as an essential component of holistic student development. Research suggests that intentional character instruction can positively influence students' social-emotional competencies, ethical decision-making, academic performance, and relationships with others (Jeynes, 2019). However, character education is most effective when it extends beyond isolated lessons or programs and becomes integrated into the daily culture, curriculum, and practices of educational environments (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). To accomplish this, educators must move beyond simply telling students what values are important and instead create opportunities for students to understand, experience, practice, reflect upon, and demonstrate those values in meaningful ways.

One framework that offers promise is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL provides a proactive approach to creating learning experiences that remove barriers and maximize opportunities for success for all learners (CAST, 2024). The framework encourages educators to provide multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, which helps ensure that all students have access to meaningful learning experiences. Although the UDL framework is typically associated with academic instruction, the principles also offer a powerful framework for teaching, modeling, and assessing character. By intentionally applying UDL principles to character education, educators can create learning environments in which values are explicitly taught, authentically modeled, actively practiced, and meaningfully assessed.

This approach is particularly important in teacher education programs, where the development of professionalism and ethical behavior is critical to preparing future educators. Teacher candidates must not only understand the importance of character and professionalism but also learn how to embody and promote these qualities in their own classrooms. Through intentional design, the UDL framework can support the development of character by ensuring that learners experience multiple ways for understanding values, engaging in authentic applications of those values, and demonstrating growth through reflection and action.

In this article, we apply UDL as a framework for modeling, teaching, practicing, and assessing character education. We begin with an overview of the research supporting both UDL and character education before highlighting promising practices from teacher education that align with the three core principles of UDL. Specifically, we explore how multiple means of

representation, engagement, and action and expression can be implemented to help students develop the knowledge, dispositions, and habits necessary for personal and professional growth.

UDL: An Overview

The UDL framework is based on three principles: Multiple Means of Representation, Multiple Means of Engagement, and Multiple Means of Action/Expression. These three principles guide instructional decision making and planning as teachers strive to meet the unique needs of the learners in their classrooms.

Multiple Means of Representation has several key elements. This principle ensures that teachers present content, instructions, and new information through multiple formats. For example, directions for class activities may be given verbally, written on the board or slide, and demonstrated through modeling or visuals. Another example is teachers who present a new vocabulary concept by writing the definition, showing the students a model or picture of the word, and using the word in a sentence.

The second principle ensures that teachers provide students with multiple means of engagement. Simply put, teachers allow students multiple ways to engage with the content they are learning. Teachers may provide students with choices to explore content in different ways. They may provide varied levels of text complexity to meet students where they are or provide elements of challenge. Teachers provide opportunities for problem based learning, hands-on exploration, manipulatives, creative outlets, and other traditional methods. Multiple means of engagement may also include variety in classroom design and structure. Learning may take place in small groups or large groups and may be led by teachers or facilitated by students themselves. Providing students with multiple ways to engage with the content they are learning helps increase engagement and improve student learning outcomes.

Lastly, the third principle of UDL is Multiple Means of Action/Expression. This principle encourages educators to provide multiple opportunities for students to express their understanding and learning. Teachers can incorporate this principle by offering variety in terms of assessments. For example, students may have opportunities to present their learning through written work, oral presentations, traditional tests, projects, creative work, and other outlets. Again, this provides students with a variety of learning differences to lean into their own strengths and abilities while expressing their understanding.

As Stein (2023) noted, these three principles align with the “what, how, and why” of learning, drawing from insights in cognitive neuroscience (p. 24). Instead of retrofitting lessons for students who struggle, UDL encourages teachers to design accessible environments from the start.

Applying UDL to Character Education

Multiple Means of Representation

When applying the first principle of UDL, Multiple Means of Representation, to character education, educators must recognize that character values, ethical principles, and professional behaviors cannot be assumed or left up to interpretation. Rather, these concepts

must be intentionally and explicitly presented through a variety of formats to ensure that all learners have access to understanding. Learners vary in how they perceive, interpret, and process information. For this reason, it's important to provide multiple pathways for accessing character-related content and is essential for developing a shared understanding of expectations, values, and behaviors.

Our experience has demonstrated that character core values must be highly visible, consistently reinforced, and accessible to all within the learning community. To support this goal, our program intentionally embeds character values throughout all programs. Core values are displayed on posters throughout the building, included in course syllabi, and incorporated in course materials. By making these values visible across multiple contexts, we create a culture in which character education is not viewed as an isolated initiative but as a shared commitment among faculty, staff, and students. This environmental representation serves as a continual reminder of the values that guide both academic and professional conduct.

Visual representation alone, however, is not enough. Faculty and staff continue to reinforce these concepts through verbal instruction, in-class discussion, and modeling. Core values are introduced and discussed explicitly in many courses. More specifically, professors also incorporate examples and case studies that illustrate how each value may be demonstrated in both university classroom settings and professional educational environments. Providing concrete examples helps learners move beyond abstract definitions toward a practical understanding of how character values are applied in their lives. This intentional instruction aligns with UDL principles by providing multiple pathways for learners to engage with and comprehend the meaning and relevance of character values.

Beginning in their sophomore year, teacher candidates receive explicit instruction on how core values and professional behaviors should be demonstrated in university coursework, field placements, and professional interactions. Faculty provide direct teaching, modeling, feedback, and opportunities for guided practice so that candidates can develop a clear understanding of these expectations before applying them in authentic settings. By systematically teaching both the meaning of character values and the behaviors that exemplify them, we establish a common language and shared understanding across the program.

Ultimately, the goal of providing multiple means of representation in character education is to ensure that all students can access, understand, and apply character values in meaningful ways. When educators intentionally present values through visual, verbal, written, and experiential formats, students are better equipped to recognize their significance, connect them to their own lives, and demonstrate them in academic, professional, and community settings. Only after a strong foundation of understanding has been established can students fully engage in authentic learning experiences that allow them to practice and embody these values in the real world.

Multiple Means of Engagement

Students develop a deeper understanding of character when they are actively engaged in applying, reflecting upon, and practicing these values in authentic contexts. The second UDL principle of Multiple Means of Engagement emphasizes the importance of fostering motivation, relevance, and meaningful participation through varied learning experiences. Within character

education, this means intentionally creating opportunities for students to explore, practice, and internalize character values through real-world experiences, collaborative learning, reflection, discussion, and authentic application.

Character education is most effective when students move beyond learning about values to actually applying them. Therefore, educators must provide multiple avenues for engagement that enable students to practice responsibility, empathy, integrity, perseverance, respect, and other core values in settings that mirror their professional and personal life. Through real-world scenarios, service-learning experiences, collaborative projects, reflective activities, and guided discussions, students can connect abstract character concepts to concrete actions and behaviors.

Within our Teacher Education program, service-learning experiences have emerged as one of the most impactful methods for engaging students in character development. Over the past several years, we have intentionally developed meaningful partnerships with community organizations to create opportunities for teacher candidates to serve, learn, and grow outside of the traditional classroom environment. Historically, teacher education programs have relied on partnerships between institutions of higher education and K-12 schools (CAEP, 2022). These partnerships provide important benefits for both pre-service teachers and school communities, allowing candidates to gain valuable instructional experiences while supporting student learning. As a result, many teacher candidates enter the profession with significant exposure to school settings and classroom practice.

However, scholars have noted that while pre-service teachers often spend substantial time in schools, opportunities to engage with the broader community can be more limited (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2020). Although field-based and clinical experiences remain essential components of teacher preparation, it is equally important for future educators to understand the communities in which their students live and learn. Service-learning experiences provide a pathway for teacher candidates to engage with diverse populations, collaborate with community stakeholders, and gain deeper insight into the cultural, social, and economic contexts that influence students and families.

These experiences support both professional growth and character development. Through community engagement, teacher candidates have opportunities to interact with individuals whose experiences may differ significantly from their own. Such interactions encourage empathy, cultural awareness, perspective-taking, and a greater appreciation for the strengths and needs of diverse communities. Hildenbrand and Schultz (2015) argue that effective service-learning experiences should provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn from and alongside people with backgrounds different from their own. Similarly, research suggests that community-based service-learning can broaden students' perspectives while increasing their understanding and acceptance of cultural differences (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2020). These outcomes align closely with the goals of character education, which seeks to develop socially responsible individuals who demonstrate respect, compassion, and ethical decision-making.

In addition to fostering cultural competence and community awareness, service-learning opportunities help teacher candidates develop confidence in their abilities to teach, communicate, and build relationships with students and families. These experiences provide authentic contexts for practicing professional dispositions while reinforcing the character values emphasized

throughout the program. In our teacher education program, candidates participate in a variety of service-learning initiatives, including tutoring, mentoring, and community outreach partnerships. Through these activities, students are challenged to apply character values in real-world situations rather than merely discussing them in a classroom setting.

A critical component of these experiences is structured reflection. At the conclusion of semester-long service-learning activities, students engage in written reflections and guided discussions that encourage them to examine how character values influenced their actions, decisions, and interactions. Reflection is a key element of experiential learning because it allows students to connect experience with understanding and personal growth (Loughran, 2002). Feedback from these reflections consistently demonstrates that students develop a stronger appreciation for the importance of character values and often report meaningful shifts in their perspectives, beliefs, and professional identities as a result of their service experiences.

Beyond service-learning, our faculty have also developed a variety of classroom-based activities and assignments designed to create additional opportunities for engagement with character education. One notable example is the *Books that Build Character* project, which has been implemented across several teacher education courses. In this initiative, faculty carefully select high-quality children's literature that highlights themes related to character development and ethical behavior. Senior teacher candidates read and analyze selected texts, identify specific character traits demonstrated within the stories, and develop discussion questions to facilitate deeper reflection and conversation. Sophomore candidates then select from these texts and share them during weekly field placement experiences in local classrooms.

This collaborative project engages students in multiple ways. Candidates analyze literature through the lens of character education, consider effective instructional strategies for teaching character values, and apply their learning in authentic classroom settings. Additionally, the project encourages future teachers to view children's literature as a powerful tool for fostering character development among K-12 students. Topics in children's literature are relatable to children (Parks & Oslick, 2021) allowing literature to serve as a "mirror" of childhood experiences (Heineke, Papola-Ellis, & Elliott, 2022). Intentionally selecting text that mirrors a child's experiences provides an opportunity for students to identify with characters, discuss choices made by characters, view situations from another's perspective, and reflect on their own choices in a non-threatening way. Through active participation, discussion, teaching, and reflection, candidates experience character education as both learners and future educators.

Faculty and staff also provide additional opportunities for engagement through book studies, faculty-led cadres, and small-group mentoring experiences focused on character education and personal development. These experiences create spaces where students can engage in meaningful dialogue about ethical decision-making, leadership, professional responsibilities, and personal growth. Such initiatives also foster supportive relationships among faculty and students, reinforcing the idea that character development is an ongoing process nurtured within a community of learners.

Ultimately, applying the UDL principle of Multiple Means of Engagement to character education requires more than simply teaching values; it requires creating diverse opportunities for students to practice, reflect upon, and internalize those values through authentic experiences.

Whether through service-learning, classroom projects, mentoring relationships, reflective activities, or community engagement, students benefit from opportunities to actively connect character values to their lived experiences. By providing varied pathways for engagement, teacher education programs can help future educators not only understand the importance of character but also develop the habits, dispositions, and commitments necessary to exemplify these values in their professional and personal lives.

Multiple Means of Action/Expression

The third principle of UDL, Multiple Means of Expression, emphasizes the importance of providing learners with varied opportunities to demonstrate what they know, understand, and value. Just as students differ in how they access information and engage in learning, they also differ in how they express their knowledge, reflect on their growth, and demonstrate competency. Within character education, this principle is particularly important because character development extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge. Students must be given meaningful opportunities to demonstrate how they understand, apply, and embody character values in their academic and professional lives.

Assessing character development can be a complex and often challenging endeavor. Unlike traditional academic content, character values and professional dispositions are not easily measured through objective assessments or standardized evaluations. This challenge does not reduce the importance of accountability in character education, but rather it requires educators to adopt assessment practices that emphasize reflection, growth, application, and continuous improvement. By providing multiple means of expression, higher education programs can create opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of character values through a variety of formats while supporting their ongoing personal and professional development.

In our Teacher Education program, we view character development as a continuous process that requires intentional reflection, self-awareness, feedback, and goal setting. Throughout the program, students are required to participate in self-assessments related to their professional dispositions. These assessments encourage students to critically examine their strengths, identify areas for growth, and consider how their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors align with the expectations of the teaching profession.

A particularly valuable aspect of this assessment process is the faculty mentorship component. As needed, candidates are paired with faculty mentors who meet with them regularly to discuss their progress, review goals, and identify strategies for overcoming challenges. Faculty mentors serve not only as evaluators but also as coaches and role models who guide students in their development as future educators. The combination of self-assessment, goal setting, and mentorship provides both support and accountability, creating a structured framework for character growth that extends beyond individual courses and experiences.

In addition to self-assessments and mentorship meetings, our program has intentionally embedded reflective assignments throughout coursework to provide students with multiple avenues for expressing their understanding of character values. These assignments often require candidates to analyze experiences, evaluate personal behaviors, connect theory to practice, and consider how core values influence their decisions and interactions. These authentic forms of assessment are especially valuable within character education because they encourage students to

demonstrate application rather than simple recall. For example, after participating in a service-learning project, candidates may reflect on how values such as empathy, responsibility, or respect influenced their interactions with others. Such opportunities allow candidates to articulate not only what they believe but also how those beliefs influence their actions in real-world settings.

Ultimately, applying the UDL principle of Multiple Means of Expression to character education requires educators to move beyond traditional assessments and create diverse opportunities for learners to demonstrate growth. Through self-assessments, individualized growth plans, reflective assignments, mentoring relationships, and authentic demonstrations of learning, students are able to express their understanding of character values in meaningful and personalized ways. By supporting reflection, goal setting, and continuous improvement, teacher education programs can help future educators develop the self-awareness, professional dispositions, and ethical commitments necessary to lead lives of character and positively impact the students and communities they serve.

Conclusion

As educational institutions strive to prepare students for success in a dynamic world, the development of character must remain a critical component of the educational mission. While academic knowledge and technical skills are important, they are most impactful when paired with the character values that enable individuals to contribute positively to their professions, communities, and society. Character education, therefore, cannot be viewed as an add-on to the curriculum. Instead, it must be intentionally embedded into the daily experiences, expectations, and interactions that shape student learning.

UDL offers a powerful framework for advancing this work. By applying the principles of multiple means of representation, engagement, and action and expression, educators can create learning environments in which character values are not only taught but also modeled, practiced, and assessed in meaningful ways. Through intentional design, students are provided opportunities to understand the significance of character, engage in authentic experiences that reinforce values, and demonstrate their growth through reflection and action. The UDL approach recognizes that students develop understanding and express growth in different ways, making it an effective approach for supporting character development across diverse learning environments.

For teacher education programs, the integration of UDL and character education is especially important. Teacher candidates are preparing to become educators who will influence not only the academic learning of future generations but also their social, emotional, and moral development. Candidates must have opportunities to experience character education through explicit instruction, authentic engagement, reflective practice, and supportive mentorship. When teacher preparation programs intentionally design experiences that foster professional dispositions and character development, they equip future educators with the knowledge, skills, and habits necessary to cultivate these same qualities in their own students.

The principles of UDL provide educators with a practical and inclusive pathway for supporting this process. By implementing UDL as a framework for character education, educators can help ensure that all learners have meaningful opportunities to develop the values that contribute to lives of integrity, responsibility, empathy, professionalism, and purpose.

References

- Berkowitz, M. W., & Bier, M. C. (2007). What works in character education. *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 5(1), 29–48. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CE-02-2007-0002>
- Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. (2022). Standard 2: Clinical partnerships and practice. CAEP. <http://secure.caepnet.org/standards/2022-ntp/standard-2>
- CAST (2024). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0. Retrieved from <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>
- Heineke, A. J., Papola-Ellis, A., & Elliott, J. (2022). Using texts as mirrors: The power of readers seeing themselves. *The Reading Teacher*, 76(3), 277–28. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2139>
- Hildenbrand, S. M., & Schultz, S. M. (2015). Implementing Service Learning in Pre-Service Teacher Coursework. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 38(3), 262-279.
- Jeynes, W. H. (2019). A Meta-Analysis on the Relationship Between Character Education and Student Achievement and Behavioral Outcomes. *Education and Urban Society*, 51(1), 33-71.
- Loughran, J. J. (2002). Effective reflective practice: In search of meaning in learning about teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 33-43.
- Parks, M., & Oslick, M. E. (2021). Using Children’s Literature to Embed Character Education in Primary Classrooms. *Dimensions*, 49(2), 29–33.
- Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal design for learning. ASCD.
- Stein, E. (2023). Elevating co-teaching with Universal Design for Learning. CAST, INC.
- Tinkler, A., & Tinkler, B. (2020). Building social capital through community-based service-learning in teacher education. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education*, 12(2), 44–58.

Cleared for Takeoff: Character in Action—Leadership Lessons From the Blue Angels

Jan Miller, EdD, The University of West Alabama

Denise Knight, EdD, The University of West Alabama

Abstract

School leaders routinely make consequential decisions amid competing priorities, incomplete information, public scrutiny, and limited time. Under such conditions, character becomes observable through judgment, communication, restraint, accountability, and the treatment of others. This paper presents a character-centered leadership framework, *Cleared for Takeoff: Character in Action*, which uses the U.S. Navy Blue Angels as a leadership metaphor for disciplined teamwork under pressure. Grounded in the Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools, the discussion organizes leadership practice around moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues and emphasizes practical wisdom as the capacity to determine which virtues a situation requires and how they should be enacted. Recent scholarship on ethical leadership, school climate, organizational trust, and character-centered school improvement supports the framework's central proposition that repeated leadership practices shape organizational culture. Four school-based leadership simulations illustrate how a character lens can inform responses to public pushback, parent pressure, communication failures, and rapidly evolving crises. The paper concludes with a practical formation cycle for educational leaders: prepare, align, act, debrief, and practice again.

Keywords: character, educational leadership, trust, school culture, ethical leadership, practical wisdom

Cleared for Takeoff: Character in Action—Leadership Lessons From the Blue Angels

Introduction

Educational leadership is frequently evaluated through outcomes, including the successful implementation of initiatives, the resolution of conflict, the management of crises, and progress toward organizational goals. Outcomes, however, provide only a partial account of leadership quality. The processes through which leaders make decisions, engage stakeholders, exercise authority, and respond to pressure also communicate organizational values. *Cleared for Takeoff: Character in Action* builds on this premise and examines character as enacted in leadership practice, with particular attention to decision-making under pressure, trust, accountability, communication, and shared responsibility.

The framework employs the Blue Angels as a metaphor for interdependent leadership. Precision formation flying requires preparation, disciplined routines, reliable communication, individual competence, and collective responsibility. Although school organizations differ fundamentally from military flight teams, the metaphor usefully highlights the interdependence of complex systems. Principals exercise formal authority, but the quality of school leadership depends on coordinated relationships among teachers, students, families, support staff, district personnel, and community partners. In this sense, leadership effectiveness is not reducible to individual expertise; it also depends on the capacity to create conditions in which people can act coherently toward shared purposes.

This framing is consistent with contemporary scholarship on character education. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) conceptualizes character as educable, developmental, and shaped through practice, role modeling, reflection, and the wider ethos of an institution. Its framework organizes virtues into four broad categories including intellectual, moral, civic, and performance, and identifies practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, as the integrative capacity through which individuals determine what a situation requires. Applied to educational leadership, this perspective shifts attention from simply naming desirable traits to examining how virtues are interpreted, balanced, and enacted when leaders face competing obligations.

Character in Formation

Four character domains provide an analytic vocabulary for examining leadership decisions. Moral character concerns ethically appropriate action and includes virtues such as integrity, honesty, compassion, fairness, and courage. Civic character concerns responsibilities toward others and the common good and includes service, collaboration, citizenship, and accountability. Intellectual character supports disciplined thinking through reflection, curiosity, critical judgment, and responsiveness to evidence. Performance character includes qualities that sustain purposeful action, including discipline, resilience, perseverance, and determination. The domains are best understood as mutually reinforcing rather than discrete; complex leadership decisions commonly require several to operate simultaneously (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) further emphasizes that performance virtues acquire ethical significance when they are directed toward worthwhile purposes. Persistence, for example, cannot be treated as inherently virtuous when it sustains an inequitable or harmful course of action. Similarly, compassion without sound judgment may produce inconsistency, while fairness applied without sensitivity to context may become unnecessarily

rigid. Practical wisdom is therefore essential because it enables leaders to deliberate among competing considerations and determine how virtues should be expressed in a particular situation. This integrative function is especially relevant in schools, where decisions routinely implicate policy, relationships, student needs, professional responsibilities, and long-term organizational culture.

Character formation also depends on repeated practice. This approach therefore treats character as enacted through habits rather than as a static personal possession. Leaders can examine behaviors such as publicly acknowledging mistakes, protecting team trust, consulting evidence before responding, and challenging ineffective practice. Each behavior may draw on multiple domains. Publicly acknowledging an error, for example, may require moral honesty, civic accountability, intellectual reflection, and performance courage. This multidimensional analysis reduces the risk of treating character as a checklist and instead connects virtue language to observable leadership practice.

Why Trust, Communication, and Accountability Matter

Trust provides an important link between individual character and organizational culture. Leaders may articulate values formally, but organizational members experience those values through recurring patterns of conduct. Consistency between stated commitments and observable behavior contributes to credibility, whereas inconsistency can weaken confidence in leadership. Özdoğru and Sarier's (2024) meta-analysis of 47 empirical studies involving 18,423 leaders found a strong overall relationship between principals' ethical leadership and teachers' positive organizational behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. Ethical leadership was especially strongly associated with organizational trust and organizational justice and was also positively related to job satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment.

Research on school climate provides complementary evidence. Using Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018 data from 125,520 teachers clustered in 7,384 schools across 37 countries, Veletić et al. (2023) examined shared beliefs, rules, trust, encouragement of initiative, and their associations with leadership. Their findings showed systematic differences between principals' and teachers' perceptions of school climate and indicated that distributed leadership was particularly stable in its association with principals' perceptions of climate. Within-country analyses also suggested that distributed leadership was more consistently associated with teachers' perceptions of climate than instructional leadership. These findings underscore the importance of examining organizational culture from multiple perspectives rather than assuming that leaders and staff experience the same environment in the same way.

Communication should therefore be understood as a substantive leadership practice rather than merely a mechanism for transmitting information. Transparent communication can convey respect and procedural fairness; careful listening can reflect humility and intellectual openness; timely follow-through can reinforce reliability; and acknowledgement of uncertainty can model honesty. In high-pressure situations, these practices become particularly consequential because ambiguity can amplify assumptions, anxiety, and mistrust. Character-based communication requires leaders to balance accuracy, timeliness, confidentiality, and respect for the people affected by a decision.

Accountability is similarly relational. Character-based accountability does not imply avoiding difficult conversations; rather, it requires leaders to address performance, behavior, or error while maintaining fairness, consistency, and human dignity. Leaders who avoid necessary accountability may undermine trust by making expectations appear negotiable or unevenly

applied. Conversely, leaders who rely on blame, public embarrassment, or inconsistent enforcement may secure short-term compliance at the expense of long-term commitment. Ethical leadership therefore requires both clarity of expectations and disciplined regard for how those expectations are enacted (Özdoğru & Sarier, 2024).

The Blue Angels as a Leadership Metaphor

The Blue Angels metaphor foregrounds several principles that are relevant to organizational leadership. First, high performance is interdependent: individual expertise cannot compensate for the absence of coordination. Second, preparation precedes pressure; teams are more likely to respond effectively when communication routines, decision processes, and expectations have been established in advance. Third, trust is connected to demonstrated competence, consistency, preparation, and responsibility rather than to confidence alone. Foley (2019), drawing on his experience as a Blue Angel pilot, similarly emphasizes operational excellence, trust, commitment, and disciplined team practice as conditions for sustained high performance.

The metaphor should nevertheless be applied cautiously. Schools are not military flight teams, and educational leadership requires deliberation, participation, responsiveness, care, and attention to the needs of diverse communities. The value of the comparison lies not in equating the two settings but in illuminating interdependence. A school's mission depends on individuals with distinct responsibilities coordinating around shared purposes. Leaders therefore need sufficient clarity to establish direction, sufficient trust to support interdependence, and sufficient professional safety for concerns and risks to be surfaced before they become more consequential.

The question of what allows six jets traveling hundreds of miles per hour to avoid collision functions as an entry point for examining trust, precision, communication, preparation, and shared responsibility. Translated into educational leadership, the corresponding question is how a complex organization maintains coherence when demands intensify. The answer is not authority or individual expertise alone. It is an organizational culture developed through repeated practices that establish shared expectations, reliable communication, and reciprocal responsibility.

Leadership Flight Simulations: Character Under Pressure

Scenario-based analysis provides a mechanism for moving from conceptual understanding to applied judgment. Dabdoub et al. (2024) identify leadership development as a central component of schoolwide character education and describe leadership preparation models that use shared language, reflection, and practical application to embed character within school culture. Martinez and Partin's (2023) review likewise emphasizes the relevance of ethics and character education to administrator preparation because school leaders routinely confront complex professional dilemmas for which technical knowledge is necessary but insufficient. Leadership flight simulations extend this applied orientation by inviting leaders to analyze realistic school situations, identify relevant character domains, and justify leadership responses.

In the first scenario, a veteran teacher publicly criticizes a new initiative. A purely positional response may focus on defending the initiative or protecting administrative authority. A character-based analysis broadens the decision frame. Moral character raises questions of fairness, respect, and honesty; civic character focuses on team trust and shared responsibility; intellectual character requires leaders to consider whether the criticism contains valid evidence;

and performance character supports emotional regulation and follow-through. Practical wisdom may therefore favor a response that acknowledges the concern without escalating a public disagreement, followed by a private conversation that listens carefully, clarifies expectations, and establishes an appropriate process for future dissent.

The second scenario concerns an influential parent who requests special treatment. The dilemma places compassion, fairness, consistency, and community pressure in tension. A leader may understand the parent's concern while also recognizing that exceptions can produce inequity or undermine established policy. Moral courage becomes particularly salient when social influence makes the expedient decision different from the most defensible one. A character-based response communicates empathy without promising an outcome that cannot be justified ethically, explains the applicable standard, considers legitimate alternatives, and applies principles that could be defended if the same request came from a family with less influence.

The third scenario involves a communication failure in which critical information was not shared before a major event. The leadership task extends beyond determining fault; it includes restoring coordination and trust. Intellectual character supports fact-finding before judgment, moral character requires honesty about what occurred, civic character emphasizes shared responsibility and relational repair, and performance character supports a disciplined response that addresses both the immediate problem and the underlying system. When the leader contributed to the breakdown, explicit acknowledgement of that contribution can serve as an important act of accountability and can help establish norms for collective learning.

The fourth scenario involves a student incident that escalates on social media. Visibility and time pressure can increase demands for an immediate response, while incomplete information increases the risk of premature judgment. In this context, restraint is not passivity but disciplined decision-making. Intellectual character requires leaders to distinguish verified information from assumption and to consider legal, ethical, and student-centered implications. Moral character requires fairness and respect for privacy; civic character directs attention to the wider school community; and performance character supports calm execution. The objective is not to communicate first, but to communicate responsibly, within applicable legal and organizational constraints, while ensuring timely support for those directly affected.

Pressure Reveals Practiced Habits

Additional pressure variables such as media attention, community backlash, time constraints, district involvement, and limited information demonstrate how contextual demands can alter the complexity of an otherwise familiar leadership problem. Pressure can narrow attention and increase reliance on habitual responses. Consequently, character under pressure is seldom created in the moment; it more often reflects patterns that have been developed previously. Leaders who routinely listen before responding are more likely to do so during conflict, and leaders who have normalized responsibility for mistakes are more likely to acknowledge them during a crisis. Similarly, teams with established communication norms are better positioned to coordinate when time is limited.

This emphasis on habituation is consistent with the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues' (2022) account of character as "caught, taught, and sought." Character is influenced by role modeling and institutional ethos, can be taught explicitly through a shared language of virtue, and can be intentionally pursued through reflection and practice. School culture therefore functions as a formative context because organizational members learn not only from formal statements but also from what leaders repeatedly model, reward, correct, and tolerate.

Character-centered leadership requires sustained attention to routine interactions because those everyday practices establish the behavioral repertoire likely to surface when the organization is tested.

From Leadership Insight to Leadership Practice

To support transfer from conceptual insight to professional practice, leadership formation can be conceptualized as a recurring five-part cycle: prepare, align, act, debrief, and practice again. Preparation involves clarifying values, policies, roles, likely constraints, and communication expectations before a difficult situation occurs. Alignment involves connecting team members to shared purpose and ensuring that responsibilities are understood. Action involves selecting and implementing a response through a balanced character lens rather than relying solely on urgency, formal authority, or personal preference.

Debriefing converts experience into organizational learning. Following an initiative, conflict, event, or crisis, leaders can examine what was intended, what occurred, which character domains were most salient, where trust was strengthened or weakened, what information was missing, and what should be repeated or revised. The purpose is not to assign blame but to improve judgment and future performance. Such reflection can also help leaders identify discrepancies between their intentions and others' experiences of leadership, an important consideration given the principal–teacher perception differences documented by Veletić et al. (2023).

The final phase, practice again, requires translating reflection into a specific behavioral commitment. General intentions such as “communicate better” are difficult to evaluate and sustain. More actionable commitments identify observable behaviors, such as determining who requires advance information before a decision is announced, anticipating likely questions, and establishing a mechanism for feedback. A second example is committing to acknowledge, correct, and explain the response to an error that affects the team. Character formation is strengthened when abstract virtues are translated into repeatable professional practices.

School leaders also influence the conditions in which others practice character. Distributed leadership, collaborative decision-making, professional dialogue, and opportunities for responsible initiative allow teachers and staff to exercise judgment rather than simply comply with directives. Dabdoub et al. (2024) argue that character education is more likely to become sustainable when it is embedded within the design and culture of the school rather than treated as an isolated program. The implication for leadership is that character formation is both personal and organizational: leaders must model virtues while also creating structures in which honesty, responsibility, service, reflection, courage, and disciplined excellence can be practiced by others.

Leadership Landing Points

Several propositions emerge from the Cleared for Takeoff framework. Character becomes particularly visible when competing demands make the most defensible course of action difficult. Repeated leadership practices contribute to culture because they communicate what the organization values. Trust is strengthened through consistency across communication, decisions, and accountability. Individual competence remains necessary but is insufficient without reciprocal responsibility. Finally, disciplined character develops through cycles of practice, reflection, feedback, and renewed action rather than through isolated statements of values.

These propositions position character-centered leadership within, rather than outside, the technical work of school administration. Ethical judgment shapes the implementation of policy; intellectual character shapes the interpretation of evidence; civic character influences whether leadership builds shared ownership; and performance character supports persistence through difficulty. Practical wisdom integrates these demands by helping leaders determine which considerations should govern action in a particular context. In this respect, character is not an additional leadership competency but a framework through which professional knowledge and authority are exercised.

The image of staying in formation provides a final integrative metaphor. Formation should not be interpreted as uniformity, silence, or unquestioned compliance. High-functioning teams require members who communicate concerns, identify risks, contribute expertise, and accept responsibility for collective outcomes. In schools, staying in formation means remaining aligned to shared educational purposes while exercising the judgment and courage necessary to speak, listen, adjust, and learn. The framework's concluding proposition captures this orientation: great leadership is not solo performance; it is disciplined character practiced together, in formation.

References

- Dabdoub, J. P., Salgado, D., Bernal, A., Berkowitz, M. W., & Salaverría, A. R. (2024). Redesigning schools for effective character education through leadership: The case of PRIMED Institute and vLACE. *Journal of Moral Education*, 53(3), 558–574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2254510>
- Foley, J. (2019). *Fearless success: Beyond high performance*. CenterPoint Publishing.
- Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). *The Jubilee Centre framework for character education in schools*. University of Birmingham. <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/character-education-/the-jubilee-centre-framework-for-character-education-in-schools/>
- Martinez, J. A., & Partin, J. M. (2023). Character education initiatives and preparation for school administrators: A review of literature. *Journal of Leadership, Equity, and Research*, 9(1), 80–99. <https://jleresearch.org/index.php/cvj/article/view/237>
- Özdoğan, M., & Sarier, Y. (2024). The relationship of ethical leadership with teachers' organizational behavior, attitudes, and perceptions: A meta-analysis study. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11, Article 1538. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-04070-6>
- Veletić, J., Price, H. E., & Olsen, R. V. (2023). Teachers' and principals' perceptions of school climate: The role of principals' leadership style in organizational quality. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 35, 525–555. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-023-09413-6>

Beyond Isolation: A Protocol in Support of Critical Friendship in Action

Lori B. Doyle, EdD, Concordia University Irvine

Kara M. Chism, EdD, Samford University

Abstract

Education institutions increasingly recognize the importance of character development initiatives, yet many operate in isolation without systematic protocols for evaluating effectiveness. This paper introduces a neo-Aristotelian framework of critical friendship as the basis for a structured approach to providing and receiving feedback for the good of the other, extending concepts typically applied to students and using them to encourage educators and administrators across K–12 and higher education contexts to engage together to provide critical-friendship feedback. A critical-friendship protocol, with discussion and conversation prompts designed to guide formative feedback on character education programs, is suggested as one solution to the problem of practice regarding the silos in which many in the character space work. Through this protocol, participants practice giving constructive critique and receiving feedback with openness, embodying character in action rather than merely theorizing about it. A five-step meeting structure is unpacked emphasizing vulnerability, reflection, skepticism, and trustworthiness as central to building and maintaining working relationships that go beyond the surface. Engagement with this protocol can transform isolated practitioners into a community of critical friends focused on advancing character education together.

Keywords: critical friendship, protocol, virtues, character

Beyond Isolation: A Protocol in Support of Critical Friendship in Action

Higher education institutions increasingly recognize the importance of character development initiatives, yet many operate in isolation without systematic protocols for evaluating effectiveness. This paper introduces the neo-Aristotelian framework of critical friendship as the basis for a structured approach to providing and receiving feedback for the good of the other, and which applies concepts to character education program assessment across K-12 and higher education contexts. Professionals are encouraged to engage in purposeful critical-friendship activities, one example being the use of a protocol with discussion and conversation prompts to experience firsthand how structured peer feedback can strengthen program effectiveness while building collaborative networks across schools and institutions. Through guided practice, protocol users can offer constructive critique and receive feedback with openness, thus embodying character in action rather than merely discussing it theoretically. Commitment to engaging with others through a critical-friendship protocol can transform isolated practitioners into a community of critical friends thus advancing character education together.

Problem of Practice

The problem space addressed by the authors of this paper is the absence of time and space for guiding education professionals through formative feedback processes specific to character work. While critical friendship has primarily been applied to student populations, we extend this framework to educators and administrators who work to put character into action in their respective roles. A gap exists regarding ways in which a critical-friendship lens can help bridge the gap between isolated professionals and institutions with a shared interest in character work. A protocol, centered on critical-friendship tenets, was missing from the conversation on and actions taken in the direction of shared growth in the character space.

Theoretical Underpinnings

While critical friendship has primarily been applied to student populations, we extend this framework to educators and administrators who work to put character into action in their respective roles, from K-12 to higher education contexts. Critical friendship creates mutual benefits through common associations where parties willingly act in others' interests (Kristjánsson, 2022). Going back to what many consider the original attempt to define friendship as a virtue would be to employ Aristotle's concept of other selves (Stern-Gillet, 1995). Kristjánsson (2022) highlighted the value-add when parties understand friendship tenets and work in this manner, and warned that the opposite approach could result in inferior results. Modern frameworks and definitions continue to flood the literature on critical friendship. Petroelje Stolle et al. (2019) suggested three central characteristics of critical friendship: vulnerability, reflection, and skepticism. It is not lost on critical-friendship proponents the need to explain away the notion that words such as critical and skeptical be applied or understood in the negative. In a recent paper focused on additional extensions to the critical-friendship literature, Petroelje Stolle and Frambaugh-Kritzer (2025) studied the value of trustworthiness and determined a need for shared language and clear criteria as helpful regarding purposeful and useful outputs.

Character in Action, not Isolation

In the field of education, virtue and character emphases have been gaining traction, and for good reason. K-12 institutions have traditionally embraced character initiatives dating back to the Reagan era (Leming, 1997), and higher education institutions are moving in this direction at an increasing pace (Fitzgerald, 2023). There is an ongoing need for practical applications and research-based claims regarding the impact of character work in schools (Character Education in Universities, 2020).

A Critical Friendship Protocol

Protocols, as defined by Segal et al. (2018), are structures for self-regulation where educators can have professional conversations. The use of protocols is important as protocols ensure all voices are a part of the conversation, provide structure, use evidence-based theories, frame the problem, and include accountability. This five-step critical friendship protocol was created to facilitate meaningful discussions between colleagues to strengthen the relationship as well as academic programs. The steps of the protocol are the following: determining shared purpose and virtue commitments, agreeing on a structure, engaging in a critical-friendship meeting, voicing virtue recognition and mutual appreciation, and taking part in ongoing growth through careful documentation. Step one, shared purpose and virtue commitments, is used to support professional growth, ethical reflection, and virtue-informed teaching through trusting, respectful peer relationships. All parties reflect on the virtues all parties are committed to upholding in the peer relationship as well as the virtues needed to grow the critical friendship. This is the foundation on which the discussions are based. Step two is the structure and agreements where participants agree on how often to meet, the meeting format, confidentiality commitments, and any norms and boundaries in place for the partnership. The third step is the meeting where critical friends ask questions of each other to improve practice. Step four is virtue recognition and mutual appreciation where partners affirm the virtues observed in each other. The fifth and final step is the establishment of ongoing growth documents that partners keep and update. This could be a reflection journal, monthly notes on virtue development, or year-end summaries of growth. These five steps of the protocol work to set a trusting relationship based on virtues with structured agreements during meeting times that can lead to mutual respect and improved programming.

Unpacking the Protocol Meeting

Step three, meeting, has a structure as it is important to have a protocol that faculty members follow to ensure productive conversations lead to meaningful outcomes. Structured peer feedback can strengthen program effectiveness while building collaborative networks across schools and institutions. Faculty members can actually practice giving constructive critique and receiving feedback with openness, thus embodying character in action rather than merely discussing it theoretically.

There are five steps that help the meeting have productive outcomes. The first step is for a colleague to share the focus of the meeting such as which teaching dilemma, practice, or ethical

challenge will be the focus. This helps provide relevant context and virtues to cultivate as a result of the meeting. Step two gives the critical friend colleague the opportunity to ask clarifying questions in a non-judgemental, values-oriented way. In step three, the crucial friend provides evidence-based observations, strengths noticed, where virtues are visible, and possible blind spots. The critical friend is describing what is seen through the evidence provided. The fourth step is where the critical friend asks challenging questions in order to deepen ethical reasoning. The fifth and final stage of the meeting is where the practitioner reflects on insights gained, shares changes to implement, and identifies any support that may be needed. The structure of this meeting allows the practitioner and the critical friend opportunities to reflect and to contribute to the focus of the meeting.

Conclusions

This paper includes an argument that a neo-Aristotelian framework of critical friendship offers a timely response to the isolation often experienced by educators engaged in character work. A five-step protocol grounded in shared virtues, structured agreements, and guided reflection was introduced as a practical mechanism for transforming individuals into communities of critical friends. The structured meeting process enables educators to practice vulnerability, reflection, skepticism, and trustworthiness in ways that both strengthen program effectiveness and embody character in action. Taken together, these practices invite professionals across K–12 and higher education to move beyond isolated efforts toward a shared approach to advancing character education.

References

- Character Education in Universities: A Framework for Flourishing. (2020). *Jubilee Centre*.
jubileecentre.ac.uk/2881/character-education/higher-education-framework
- Fitzgerald, C. (2023). *Character development in higher education using classical archetypes*.
Journal of College and Character, 24(1), 21-40, DOI: 10.1080/2194587X.2022.2157438
- Kristjánsson, K. (2022). *Friendship for virtue*. Oxford University Press.
- Leming, J. S. (1997). *Whither goes character education? Objectives, pedagogy, and research in education programs*. Journal of Education, 179(2), 11-34.
- Petroelje Stolle, E., & Frambaugh-Kritzer, C. (2025). Critical friendship quality and trustworthiness: Our new understandings. *Studying Teacher Education*, 21(1), 22-38.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2024.2443572>
- Petroelje Stolle, E., Frambaugh-Kritzer, C., Freese, A., & Persson, A. (2019). Investigating Critical Friendship: Peeling Back the Layers. *Studying Teacher Education*, 19-30.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2019.1580010>
- Segal, A., Lefstein, A., & Vedder-Weiss, D. (2018). Appropriating protocols for the regulation of teacher professional conversations. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 70, 215-226.
- Stern-Gillet, S. (1995). *Aristotle's philosophy of friendship*. SUNY Press.

Appendix A: Critical Friendship Protocol

Critical Friendship Protocol for Educators

1. Shared Purpose & Virtue Commitments

Purpose: To support professional growth, ethical reflection, and virtue-informed teaching through a trusting, respectful peer relationship.

Virtue Commitments:

☐ Honesty	☐ Humility	☐ Respect	☐ Empathy
☐ Courage	☐ Justice	☐ Practical Wisdom	☐ Other

Reflection: What virtues do I want to grow in through this critical friendship?

2. Structure & Agreements

Frequency: _____

Format: ☐ In-person ☐ Online ☐ Hybrid

Roles: ☐ Similarities ☐ Differences ☐ Overlapping roles

Confidentiality Agreement: All conversations remain private, non-evaluative, and based in mutual trust.

Reflection: What norms or boundaries do we want to set for our partnership?

3. Meeting Steps

STEP 1 — Focus Deliberation (5 minutes)

The practitioner shares:

- A teaching dilemma, practice, or ethical challenge
- Relevant context
- Virtues they hope to cultivate

What practice, challenge, or virtue am I bringing to this session?

STEP 2 — Clarifying Questions (5 minutes)

The critical friend asks questions that are:

- Non-judgmental
- Curiosity-based
- Values-oriented

Examples:

- “What virtues are central to this situation?”
- “What tensions between values do you feel?”

Helpful clarifying questions I received:

STEP 3 — Descriptive Feedback (10 minutes)

The critical friend provides:

- Evidence-based observations
- Strengths noticed
- Areas where virtues are visible
- Possible blind spots

Virtue-aligned feedback frames:

- “From a justice perspective...”
- “Humility might invite us to consider...”
- “Practically speaking, wisdom might suggest...”

What descriptive feedback stood out to me?

STEP 4 — Critical Questions / Challenge (10 minutes)

This stage deepens ethical reasoning.

Examples:

- “What would a more courageous response look like?”
- “How might compassion shift your approach?”
- “Where might students perceive injustice?”
- “Are any virtues in conflict here?”

Challenging questions that moved my thinking:

STEP 5 — Practitioner Reflection (5 minutes)

The practitioner summarizes:

- Insights gained
- Virtues they want to strengthen
- Changes they plan to implement
- Support they may need

What did I learn about myself as an educator? What are some next steps for me to try?

4. Virtue Recognition & Mutual Appreciation (2 minutes)

Partners affirm virtues they observed in one another:

- “Your honesty helped clarify...”
- “Your humility in receiving feedback was evident.”
- “You showed courage by naming a difficult dilemma.”

Virtues I saw in my partner:

5. Ongoing Growth Documentation (Optional)

Partners may keep:

- A shared or personal reflection journal
- Monthly notes on dilemmas, choices, and virtue development
- Term or year-end summaries of growth

Key moments of growth this month:

Character in Action: Lessons From the Hundred Acre Wood

Denise Knight, EdD, The University of West Alabama

Jan Miller, EdD, The University of West Alabama

Abstract

Character education becomes most useful when virtues move from abstract language to observable choices, relationships, and habits. This paper presents a story-based approach developed for the 2026 Character Convening that uses familiar figures from A. A. Milne's Hundred Acre Wood as accessible lenses for examining character in action. The workshop organizes reflection around moral, performance, relational, and civic dimensions of character and pairs these dimensions with characters whose recognizable dispositions invite discussion of both strengths and growth areas. Participants engage with brief scenarios, a non-diagnostic personality reflection, and a 30-day action commitment. The approach is grounded in contemporary character education scholarship emphasizing intentional practice, virtue literacy, reflection, habituation, and the integration of character that is caught, taught, and sought. The paper also clarifies that the workshop's relational domain is a pedagogical adaptation rather than a replacement for the intellectual virtue category in the Jubilee Centre's established framework. Implications are offered for K–12 schools, higher education, leadership development, professional learning, and community settings. The central argument is that narrative can make the language of virtue memorable, but character formation requires repeated opportunities to notice, name, practice, reflect on, and sustain virtuous action.

Keywords: character education, virtue, narrative pedagogy, relational leadership, civic character, reflection

Character in Action: Lessons From the Hundred Acre Wood

Introduction

Character education is often discussed through the language of virtues, values, dispositions, and ethical decision making. The challenge for educators and leaders is not simply to define those terms, but to help people recognize what they look like in ordinary practice. The 2026 Character Convening session, *Character in Action: Lessons From the Hundred Acre Wood*, was designed around that challenge. Its premise is straightforward: character is made visible through choices, behaviors, relationships, and responses to difficulty. The session therefore uses familiar Winnie-the-Pooh characters as narrative anchors for examining how character can be enacted rather than merely described.

The approach aligns with contemporary scholarship that treats character as educable and emphasizes the development of a shared language for virtues, opportunities for practice, and reflection on lived experience. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) describes character education as encompassing intentional and unintentional educational experiences that cultivate virtues and emphasizes three mutually reinforcing modes: character caught through culture and modeling, character taught through explicit instruction, and character sought through personal reflection and self-directed growth. Research informing the Centre's Character Teaching Inventory likewise suggests that schools with intentional character education use multiple strategies across these modes rather than relying on a single lesson or program (Arthur et al., 2022).

The Hundred Acre Wood provides an inviting context for this work because its characters are recognizable not as perfect exemplars but as distinctive personalities with strengths, limitations, habits, and relationships. Pooh's kindness, Piglet's courage, Rabbit's responsibility, Tigger's enthusiasm, Eeyore's emotional honesty, Owl's reflective knowledge, Kanga's care, Roo's curiosity, and Christopher Robin's relational leadership create memorable entry points for discussing virtue. The purpose is not to claim that fictional characters constitute a validated theory of personality or moral development. Rather, they function as pedagogical metaphors that help participants notice patterns, discuss tensions among virtues, and connect abstract concepts to concrete behavior.

From Virtue Language to Character in Action

The theoretical foundation for the workshop begins with a virtue-based understanding of character. The Jubilee Centre's framework identifies intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues as interdependent building blocks that contribute to human flourishing and are coordinated through practical wisdom, or *phronesis* (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). Moral virtues include qualities such as compassion, honesty, courage, justice, and humility. Civic virtues support responsible participation and service within communities. Intellectual virtues guide the pursuit and use of knowledge. Performance virtues, including perseverance, resilience, confidence, and teamwork, enable individuals to pursue worthwhile goals. Importantly, performance virtues are not morally sufficient on their own; they become character strengths when directed toward worthy ends.

The conference presentation adapts this framework for a brief, interactive learning experience by organizing discussion around four applied domains: moral character, performance character, relational character, and civic character. Moral character is framed as doing what is

right; performance character as doing one's best; relational character as treating others well; and civic character as contributing to the community. This adaptation should be interpreted carefully. Relational character is not presented as a formal substitute for the Jubilee Centre's intellectual virtue category. Instead, it is a pedagogical emphasis that makes empathy, patience, respect, loyalty, care, and belonging explicit for audiences focused on education and leadership. Intellectual virtues remain important and are represented most visibly through Owl's curiosity, reflection, knowledge, and need for humility.

Why Narrative and Familiar Characters Can Support Reflection

Stories provide a concrete setting in which motives, actions, consequences, and relationships can be examined together. In character education, narrative can support virtue literacy by giving participants a shared vocabulary and a memorable context for discussing what a virtue looks like in action. The Hundred Acre Wood is particularly useful because the characters' contrasting dispositions create natural opportunities for perspective taking. A participant who identifies with Rabbit's organization may recognize the value of Tigger's spontaneity; someone who identifies with Tigger's energy may see the balancing value of Eeyore's deliberation or Pooh's steadiness.

The workshop does not depend on reproducing literary passages. Instead, it draws on broad, familiar character patterns and on the enduring theme that individuals with different dispositions can belong to and contribute to the same community. Milne's work has remained culturally recognizable across generations, and later collections of Pooh-inspired reflections have continued to use the stories as prompts for thinking about change, friendship, mistakes, optimism, and perspective (Milne, 2007). Used carefully, this familiarity lowers the threshold for participation. Participants can enter a serious conversation about courage, responsibility, compassion, belonging, and leadership without beginning with specialized philosophical terminology.

Accessibility, however, should not be confused with triviality. The pedagogical value lies in what happens after recognition. Participants must move from "Which character am I?" to more demanding questions: What does this strength look like under pressure? When can it become a liability? Which virtue is underdeveloped? Whose disposition balances mine? What action would make the virtue observable? These questions shift the activity from entertainment toward reflective practice and align with the principle that character should be actively sought through intentional self-examination and habituation (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

The Hundred Acre Wood Character Lenses

The workshop maps characters to virtues and domains as discussion anchors. Pooh represents relational character through kindness, loyalty, dependable presence, and inclusion. Piglet represents moral character through courage that persists despite uncertainty or fear. Rabbit highlights performance character through responsibility, planning, productivity, and reliability, while also raising questions about perfectionism and control. Christopher Robin illustrates civic and relational leadership through inclusion, trust, care, and the creation of belonging. Tigger contributes enthusiasm, optimism, and initiative, qualities that can support both performance and civic participation when balanced by self-awareness.

Scenario-Based Application

The presentation moves from trait recognition to ethical and relational judgment through short scenarios. In the first, Rabbit excludes Roo because Roo slows the group, and Piglet notices the exclusion but feels nervous about speaking. Participants consider the morally appropriate response, the fears that may inhibit action, and what courage would look like behaviorally. The scenario makes moral courage concrete: courage is not the absence of apprehension but action in service of a worthy good despite apprehension. It also demonstrates that a virtue becomes educationally useful when learners can identify the decision point at which it must be practiced.

The third scenario centers on Eeyore sitting quietly apart while others celebrate. Participants consider what a relationally virtuous response would be, how helping differs from fixing, and how emotionally safe communities behave. This emphasis is supported by research on belonging and psychological safety. A meta-analytic review found that school belonging is positively associated with motivational, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Research with teachers has also linked relation-oriented school leadership and team effectiveness with psychological safety (Shahid & Din, 2021). These findings reinforce the workshop's emphasis on presence, respect, inclusion, and the capacity to make room for different dispositions.

The final scenario imagines a storm damaging the Hundred Acre Wood and asks how different characters might respond. The focus shifts from individual traits to civic character: collaboration, service, leadership, and belonging. Participants examine how a resilient community benefits from different contributions. The organized person may coordinate resources, the relational leader may connect people, the encourager may sustain morale, the reflective person may identify overlooked risks, and the courageous person may act despite uncertainty. Civic character thus becomes more than a disposition toward service; it involves using one's strengths responsibly in relation to a shared community. The Jubilee Centre's civic character research similarly emphasizes active, informed, and morally responsible participation in communal life (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

The Personality Reflection as a Developmental Tool

A central interactive component is the Winnie-the-Pooh Character Personality Assessment, which asks participants to rate statements associated with nine character profiles. The instrument identifies a highest and second-highest character alignment and then prompts reflection on strengths, growth areas, balancing dispositions, and team contribution. Its intended purpose is developmental and conversational. It should not be described or used as a psychometrically validated personality measure, diagnostic instrument, or predictor of leadership effectiveness. No reliability, validity, normative, or factor-analytic evidence has been established for the workshop tool.

That limitation is also a strength when it is made explicit: the activity is designed to prompt self-observation rather than label participants. A score is the beginning of inquiry, not the conclusion. Participants are encouraged to ask whether the result fits their lived behavior, how their strengths appear under stress, and what complementary virtues they need to cultivate. The reflection is consistent with the broader goal of character education as an active process. The most useful outcome is not identifying as Pooh, Piglet, Rabbit, or another character; it is identifying a specific habit that can be practiced with greater intentionality.

From Reflection to Habituation: The 30-Day Commitment

The session culminates in a simple sentence stem: “One way I will put character into action is . . .” Participants translate reflection into a 30-day commitment. This step is essential because character formation is not achieved through recognition alone. Virtue-based approaches emphasize habituation: repeated practice helps dispositions become more stable and available when circumstances require them. The Jubilee Centre framework similarly presents character as caught, taught, and sought and encourages opportunities for action, reflection, and increasingly self-directed practice (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

Implications for Educational and Leadership Settings

The Hundred Acre Wood framework is intentionally adaptable. In K–12 settings, educators can use age-appropriate scenarios to help students name virtues, consider competing responses, and practice perspective taking. In leadership preparation, the characters can be used to examine how strengths become liabilities when overextended and how practical wisdom shapes ethical decision making. In faculty retreats and professional learning communities, the framework can provide a low-risk entry point for discussing team dynamics, communication, belonging, responsibility, and shared leadership. In higher education, it can support conversations about the broader formative purposes of universities, including student flourishing and holistic development (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues & Oxford Character Project, 2020).

Limitations and Considerations

Several limitations warrant attention. The character mappings are interpretive and were developed for facilitation rather than empirical classification. Cultural familiarity with Winnie-the-Pooh cannot be assumed, and some audiences may connect more readily with other stories or local narratives. The simplicity that makes the framework engaging can also encourage overgeneralization if participants treat virtues as discrete or personalities as fixed. Facilitators should therefore emphasize that people display multiple dispositions across contexts and that mature character requires integration, judgment, and growth.

Conclusion

Character education is most consequential when it reaches the level of ordinary action. The Hundred Acre Wood offers a memorable way to begin that work because its characters make differences in temperament, strength, limitation, friendship, and community easy to see. Yet the purpose of the framework is not nostalgia and not personality labeling. Its purpose is to help participants move from recognition to judgment, from judgment to practice, and from practice to habit.

When Pooh’s kindness, Piglet’s courage, Rabbit’s responsibility, Tigger’s enthusiasm, Eeyore’s honesty, Owl’s reflection, Kanga’s care, Roo’s curiosity, and Christopher Robin’s relational leadership are used as prompts rather than prescriptions, they create a shared language for examining how people live and lead together. Character in action is ultimately revealed not by the character a participant selects on an assessment, but by the repeated choices through which courage, compassion, responsibility, wisdom, service, and belonging become visible in a community.

References

- Arthur, J., Fullard, M., & O’Leary, C. (2022). Teaching character education: What works research report. Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham.
<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/project/teaching-character-education-what-works/>
- Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). The Jubilee Centre framework for character education in schools (3rd ed.). University of Birmingham.
<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/?character-education=the-jubilee-centre-framework-for-character-education-in-schools>
- Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, & Oxford Character Project. (2020). Character education in universities: A framework for flourishing. University of Birmingham & University of Oxford.
<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/character-education-/higher-education-framework/>
- Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2020). The relationships between school belonging and students’ motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: A meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(6), 641–680.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615116>
- Mertens, E. C. A., Deković, M., Leijten, P., van Londen, M., & Reitz, E. (2020). Components of school-based interventions stimulating students’ intrapersonal and interpersonal domains: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23, 605–631.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-020-00328-y>
- Milne, A. A. (2007). *Positively Pooh: Timeless wisdom from Pooh*. Penguin Group.
- Shahid, S., & Din, M. (2021). Fostering psychological safety in teachers: The role of school leadership, team effectiveness & organizational culture. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, 9(2), 122–149.
<https://doi.org/10.17583/ijelm.2021.6317>

Bridling Character: Integrating Equine-Assisted Learning and Virtue Ethics in Character Education

Mary M. Lombardo-Graves, EdD

Abstract

Character education has traditionally emphasized the transmission of moral values through direct instruction, reflection, and social-emotional learning activities. However, these approaches often struggle to bridge the gap between understanding virtues conceptually and embodying them in practice. Drawing upon Aristotelian virtue ethics and contemporary experiential learning theory, this article explores Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) as a model for character formation. Through structured interactions with horses, learners engage in experiences that require patience, courage, empathy, emotional regulation, and practical wisdom (phronesis). Because horses provide immediate and nonjudgmental feedback, participants have opportunities to develop self-awareness, reflect upon their actions, and cultivate moral dispositions through repeated practice. This article proposes an integrative model of character formation consisting of embodied engagement, immediate feedback, guided reflection, habituation of virtue, and the transfer of learning to broader social contexts. The article concludes by discussing implications for educators and researchers seeking to develop more experiential, relational, and embodied approaches to character education.

Keywords: character education, virtue ethics, equine-assisted learning, experiential learning, practical wisdom

Bridling Character: Integrating Equine-Assisted Learning and Virtue Ethics in Character Education

Introduction

Character formation has long been recognized as a fundamental purpose of education, extending beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge to encompass the cultivation of moral development, ethical behavior, and responsible citizenship (Lickona, 1991). Although schools have traditionally sought to foster virtues such as honesty, courage, responsibility, empathy, and respect, these efforts have often relied on direct instruction, discussion, and reflection. While these approaches have undoubtedly contributed to students' moral development, they have also revealed an enduring challenge: learners may understand the importance of virtue intellectually without developing the dispositions necessary to consistently embody those virtues in their daily lives (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Consequently, character education risks becoming an abstract exercise rather than a transformative process rooted in experience, reflection, and practice.

This perspective is consistent with the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics, which emphasizes that character is formed through habituation rather than instruction alone. Aristotle (1925) argued that virtues are cultivated through repeated action within meaningful social contexts, ultimately becoming stable dispositions that guide thought and behavior. Central to this process is *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which enables individuals to discern how to act appropriately in complex and ever-changing circumstances. Similarly, Dewey (1938) maintained that education should be grounded in experience, contending that meaningful learning occurs when individuals actively engage with their environment, reflect upon those experiences, and apply their insights to future situations.

Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) offers a promising context in which these principles can be put into practice. Through structured interactions with horses, learners participate in experiences that demand attentiveness, emotional regulation, adaptability, and empathy. Horses are highly responsive animals whose reactions often mirror participants' emotional states, patterns of communication, and behavioral tendencies (Dunning, 2017). As a result, learners receive immediate, nonjudgmental feedback that encourages reflection and self-awareness while creating opportunities to practice virtues in authentic and emotionally meaningful contexts.

This article proposes that EAL provides a unique opportunity to bridge classical conceptions of virtue ethics with contemporary approaches to character education. Rather than viewing character as a collection of traits to be taught, this perspective recognizes character formation as an embodied, relational, and developmental process. Drawing upon scholarship in virtue ethics, experiential learning, and equine-assisted practice, this article presents an integrative framework through which character is cultivated through embodied engagement, immediate feedback, guided reflection, habituation, and the transfer of learning to everyday life. In doing so, the article advances the argument that EAL is not merely an extracurricular activity or therapeutic intervention but a powerful educational approach capable of transforming abstract virtues into lived experience.

Virtue Ethics as a Framework for Character Formation

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, provides a rich and enduring framework for understanding character formation as a dynamic, developmental process (Aristotle, 1925). Unlike deontological ethics, which emphasizes adherence to rules, or consequentialist ethics, which evaluates actions based on outcomes, virtue ethics centers on the moral agents of their character, dispositions, and capacity for wise judgment. The central question shifts from “What

should I do?” to “What kind of person should I become?” This shift has significant implications for education, as it places the focus not merely on behavioral compliance or cognitive understanding, but on the cultivation of enduring moral character (Ainsley, 2017).

At the heart of virtue ethics is the concept of virtue as a stable disposition to think, feel, and act in ways that promote human flourishing. Aristotle (1925) defines virtues as habits developed through practice, guided by reason, and oriented toward the “mean” between extremes. For example, courage exists between recklessness and cowardice, while temperance lies between indulgence and insensibility. These virtues are not innate; rather, they are cultivated through repeated engagement in morally relevant actions, gradually becoming internalized as part of one’s character.

A key component of this framework is *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Practical wisdom enables individuals to discern the right course of action in specific contexts, especially when rules are insufficient or when moral situations are complex and ambiguous (Aristotle, 1925). It involves not only intellectual reasoning but also emotional attunement and situational awareness. In this sense, virtue ethics recognizes that moral life cannot be reduced to formulas or universal prescriptions; instead, it requires the development of judgment that is responsive to context.

The ultimate goal of virtue ethics is *eudaimonia*, often translated as “flourishing” or “living well.” Flourishing is not simply happiness in a superficial sense, but a deeper form of well-being that arises from living in accordance with virtue (Kristjánsson, 2015). It reflects the fulfillment of human potential as rational and social beings. From this perspective, moral education is not merely about preventing wrongdoing or promoting prosocial behavior, but about guiding individuals toward a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Importantly, virtue ethics emphasizes that moral knowledge alone is insufficient (Ainsley, 2017). One may understand what courage or justice entails intellectually, yet fail to act accordingly when faced with real-world challenges. Thus, the cultivation of virtue requires more than instruction; it requires practice, experience, and reflection. This emphasis on lived experience positions virtue ethics as particularly relevant to educational contexts that aim to develop not only knowledgeable students, but morally grounded individuals.

Equine-Assisted Learning as an Experiential Context

Defining Equine-Assisted Learning

EAL is an experiential educational approach in which participants engage in structured interactions with horses to develop personal, social, and ethical competencies. Unlike equine-assisted therapy, which is primarily clinical and focused on diagnosis or treatment, EAL is explicitly educational in nature. Its purpose is to foster growth in areas such as character formation, communication, emotional awareness, leadership, problem-solving, and self-regulation (EAGALA, 2008; Lentini & Knox, 2015).

Building on the need for experiential, relational, and context-rich approaches to character education, EAL emerges as a compelling educational practice that aligns closely with the principles of virtue ethics. Effective character formation requires more than abstract instruction; it necessitates opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful action, receive immediate and authentic feedback, and reflect on their experiences in ways that promote internal growth. EAL provides precisely this type of environment by situating learners within dynamic, embodied, and relational interactions with horses.

A defining feature of EAL is the horse's responsiveness. Horses are highly attuned to nonverbal cues, emotional states, and inconsistencies in human behavior. As prey animals, they rely on acute sensitivity to their environment, which makes them particularly responsive to human body language, tone, and intention (Birke & Thompson, 2017; Callara et al., 2024). This responsiveness creates immediate and often unfiltered feedback loops: when a participant approaches a horse with anxiety, inconsistency, or lack of clarity, the horse's reaction reflects those internal states. Conversely, calm, focused, and intentional behavior tends to elicit cooperation and trust.

Empirical Evidence and Case Examples

Although research on EAL is still developing, existing studies provide promising evidence of its effectiveness in promoting outcomes closely aligned with character education. Much of the literature focuses on social-emotional development, but these findings have clear implications for virtue formation. Empirical studies indicate that participation in EAL programs is associated with improvements in self-esteem, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills (Lentini & Knox, 2015; Pendry et al., 2014). For example, Pendry and Roeter (2013) found that adolescents engaged in equine-facilitated learning demonstrated significant reductions in stress levels and increases in positive social behaviors. These outcomes suggest that EAL supports the development of virtues and dispositions such as resilience, empathy, and self-control, which are foundational to character education.

Research also highlights the importance of structured reflection in enhancing learning outcomes (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Narvaez, 2010). Programs that incorporate facilitated debriefing sessions enable participants to process their experiences and connect them to broader life contexts. During these sessions, learners are encouraged to articulate what they observed, how they felt, and what they learned. This reflective process is essential for transforming experience into understanding and for reinforcing the internalization of virtue (Kolb, 1984). Without reflection, experiences may remain isolated events; with reflection, they become meaningful components of personal growth.

Case examples from educational settings further illustrate the impact of EAL. Students who struggle in traditional classroom environments, particularly those with behavioral, emotional, or learning challenges, often demonstrate increased engagement and motivation during equine-assisted activities (Schultz, 2017; Yorke et al., 2013). The hands-on, relational nature of EAL provides an alternative pathway for learning that accommodates diverse needs and learning styles. Participants frequently report increased confidence, improved communication skills, and heightened awareness of their behavior and its impact on others (Baldwin et al., 2021; Porges, 2011).

While longitudinal research is still needed to establish the long-term effects of EAL, the existing evidence suggests significant potential. Its ability to integrate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of learning positions it as a particularly effective tool for fostering holistic development. EAL provides a rich and multifaceted context for character development by integrating experiential engagement, relational feedback, and reflective practice. Grounded in experiential learning theory, embodied cognition, and relational learning, it aligns closely with the principles of virtue ethics.

Integrative Model for Character Formation

Building on the alignment between virtue ethics and EAL, a comprehensive model for character formation emerges that integrates philosophical principles with experiential pedagogy.

This model conceptualizes character development as a dynamic, cyclical process in which learners engage in embodied experiences, receive immediate feedback, reflect on their actions, and gradually internalize virtuous dispositions. Grounded in Aristotelian notions of habituation and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and supported by experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), this integrative framework provides a structured yet flexible approach to cultivating moral character.

This model emphasizes the interaction between experience, reflection, and relational engagement. Each component contributes to the development of virtue, while also reinforcing the others in an ongoing cycle of growth.

1. Embodied Engagement

The first component of the model, embodied engagement, positions learning as an active, physical, and relational process. In EAL contexts, learners interact directly with horses through activities such as leading, grooming, navigating obstacles, or cooperative tasks. These experiences require learners to engage not only cognitively, but also emotionally and physically, aligning with theories of embodied cognition that emphasize the integration of mind and body in learning (Wilson, 2002).

Importantly, these experiences are not simulated or hypothetical. They involve real consequences and authentic interactions, which heighten engagement and deepen learning. Learners must respond to the horse as a sentient being, making decisions in real time and adjusting their behavior based on the horse's responses (Callara et al., 2024). This immediacy transforms learning from abstract discussion into lived experience, reinforcing the development of embodied understanding.

2. Immediate Feedback

The second component, immediate feedback, is a defining feature of EAL and a critical mechanism for character development. Horses are highly sensitive to human behavior, responding to subtle cues such as posture, tone, and emotional energy. As a result, they provide consistent and nonjudgmental feedback that reflects the learner's internal state and external actions (Birke & Thompson, 2017).

This feedback is particularly powerful because it is instantaneous and experiential. Unlike traditional educational settings, where feedback may be delayed or mediated through evaluation, the horse's response occurs in real time. If a learner approaches with anxiety or inconsistency, the horse may withdraw or resist; if the learner demonstrates calmness and clarity, the horse is more likely to respond cooperatively. These responses create a direct link between action and outcome, reinforcing self-awareness and accountability. This process encourages learners to regulate their emotions, maintain calmness, and act with intentionality, aligning with research on the role of co-regulation and emotional safety in learning (Baldwin et al., 2021).

Moreover, the nonverbal and nonjudgmental nature of the feedback reduces defensiveness and encourages openness to learning. Participants are less likely to perceive the horse's response as criticism and more likely to view it as information, fostering a reflective and growth-oriented mindset.

3. Guided Reflection

While experience and feedback are essential, they do not automatically lead to learning. The third component of the model, guided reflection, serves as the bridge between action and understanding. Facilitators play a crucial role in helping learners interpret their experiences,

identify patterns in their behavior, and connect these insights to broader concepts of character and virtue.

Reflection is a central element of experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of processing experience in order to construct meaning (Kolb, 1984). In EAL, reflection may take the form of group discussions, journaling, or guided questioning. Facilitators might ask learners to consider what they noticed during an activity, how their actions influenced the outcome, and what they might do differently in the future.

4. Habituation of Virtue

The fourth component, habituation of virtue, represents the core of the model's alignment with Aristotelian ethics (Annas, 2011; Hurthouse, 1999; Kristjansson, 2015). Habituation refers to the process by which repeated actions become internalized as stable dispositions. Through ongoing cycles of engagement, feedback, and reflection, learners gradually develop patterns of behavior that reflect virtuous character. Habituation in this model is not mechanical or rote. It is supported by reflection and guided by practical wisdom, ensuring that learners understand the meaning and purpose of their actions. This combination of practice and understanding distinguishes genuine virtue from mere compliance, emphasizing the development of authentic moral character.

In EAL, this process is facilitated by the iterative nature of activities. Learners repeatedly engage in tasks that require similar virtues such as patience, empathy, and self-regulation while also encountering new challenges that expand their capacities. Each interaction provides an opportunity to practice, refine, and reinforce these dispositions. Over time, these repeated experiences contribute to the integration of virtue into the learner's character. Actions that initially require conscious effort become more natural and automatic, reflecting the internalization of moral habits.

5. Transfer to Broader Contexts

The final component, transfer to broader contexts, extends the impact of EAL beyond the immediate learning environment. For character education to be meaningful, the virtues developed in one context must be applied in others. This transfer is essential for ensuring that character formation is not confined to specific activities but becomes a consistent aspect of the learner's behavior. This aligns with Aristotle's (1925) assertion that virtue is achieved when right action becomes a stable and enduring part of one's character.

Facilitators support learners in identifying connections between their experiences in EAL and situations in their daily lives, such as interactions with peers, academic challenges, or family relationships. For example, a learner who develops patience while working with a horse may be encouraged to apply that patience in classroom settings or during conflicts with others. Research on experiential learning emphasizes that transfer is more likely to occur when learners actively reflect on their experiences and are provided with opportunities to apply their learning in new contexts (Kolb, 1984). By reinforcing these connections, EAL supports the generalization of virtue and the development of consistent moral behavior.

Together, these five components illustrate how EAL functions as a comprehensive and intentional model for character education. The model's experiential, relational, and embodied approaches to learning provide a critical bridge between moral knowledge and moral action, as they engage learners cognitively, emotionally, and physically within meaningful contexts (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Wilson, 2002). Within EAL, these dimensions converge as participants engage in embodied interactions with horses, receiving immediate

relational feedback that supports the development of self-regulation, empathy, and practical wisdom (Kristjánsson, 2015; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Pendry et al., 2014).

Implications and Conclusion

Implications for Educators

This model reaffirms the importance of educating the whole person intellectually, emotionally, and morally (Navarez, 2010). By aligning virtue ethics with experiential learning, the model offers a vision of education that prioritizes human flourishing (eudaimonia) as a central goal (Aristotle, 1925; Kristjánsson, 2015). It challenges educators to create environments in which students not only acquire knowledge but also develop the dispositions necessary to live meaningful and ethical lives.

Integrating EAL with virtue ethics highlights the importance of experiential, relational, and embodied approaches in character education (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 1984; Wilson, 2002). This model suggests that virtue is most effectively cultivated in contexts that engage the whole person, while providing guidance, feedback, and reflection (Navarez, 2010; Schultz, 2017). As schools and educators seek innovative strategies for ethical formation, EAL offers a model for how character education can move beyond abstract teaching to concrete, meaningful practice. By grounding experiential learning in a philosophical framework, educators and researchers can ensure that programs are not only engaging but also theoretically coherent, ethically sound, and practically effective.

This alignment between theory and practice positions EAL as a promising approach for cultivating virtue in contemporary education. Integrating virtue ethics with EAL offers a robust and innovative approach to character education. This model bridges the gap between theory and application, providing learners with meaningful opportunities to develop virtue in action. By emphasizing embodied engagement, relational learning, and the habituation of virtue, the model provides a robust framework for rethinking character education in contemporary contexts (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). While EAL serves as a powerful illustration of these principles, the model's broader significance lies in its adaptability and its potential to inform a wide range of educational practices. Ultimately, this model invites educators to move beyond teaching about character toward creating conditions in which character is actively formed through experience, reflection, and meaningful engagement with the world.

Implications for Research

The integrative model also opens several avenues for future research. While existing studies on EAL demonstrate promising outcomes, there is a need for more rigorous and longitudinal research to examine its impact on character formation over time (Lentini & Knox, 2015; Pendry et al., 2014). Such research could explore how virtues are internalized, sustained, and transferred across contexts.

For researchers, this integration presents opportunities to explore the impact of EAL on character formation more systematically. Longitudinal studies, in particular, could provide valuable insights into the sustainability of outcomes and the mechanisms through which change occurs (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025). Longitudinal research can explore the durability of character development over time, shedding light on the lasting impact over time, shedding light on the lasting impact of virtue-informed experiential learning. Additionally, research that examines diverse populations and contexts can help ensure that EAL approaches are inclusive and adaptable (Gay, 2010). Cross-cultural studies are particularly valuable, addressing questions

about how conceptions of virtue may differ across contexts and how EAL programs can be adapted to diverse populations.

The theoretical integration of virtue ethics and EAL also generates important avenues for empirical inquiry. Research can examine the extent to which EAL fosters the development of specific virtues, how reflection mediates learning, and the transfer of virtuous behavior from equine contexts to social and academic settings. Mixed-methods designs, including qualitative observation, participant reflection, and behavioral assessments, can provide a nuanced understanding of both experiential and ethical outcomes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). These approaches may be particularly valuable, combining quantitative measures of social-emotional outcomes with qualitative insights into participants' experiences. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how and why EAL is effective.

Further research is also needed to examine the mechanisms of transfer, investigating how learning in equine contexts translates to behavior in academic, social, and community settings (Kolb, 1984). Understanding these processes can inform the design of more effective programs and support the broader application of the model. Finally, comparative studies that examine EAL alongside other experiential approaches could help identify common elements that contribute to successful character development, strengthening the theoretical foundation of the model (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

Conclusion

Virtue ethics provides the philosophical foundation for understanding how moral dispositions are developed through practice, reflection, and engagement in ethically meaningful contexts. EAL emerges within this context as a powerful and innovative educational practice that aligns closely with the principles of virtue ethics. Through structured, experiential interactions with horses, learners engage cognitively, emotionally, and physically in ways that promote self-awareness, character formation, and ethical decision-making. The immediacy of feedback, the necessity of emotional regulation, and the relational dynamics inherent in equine interactions create conditions in which virtues such as courage, temperance, and practical wisdom can be actively developed and reinforced.

Bridging virtue ethics with experiential practices such as EAL offers a promising pathway for reimagining character education. By creating spaces where learners can engage, reflect, and habituate virtue in real-world, embodied contexts, this approach holds promise for cultivating moral agents capable of ethical reasoning, empathy, and responsible action. Such an approach not only prepares students to navigate moral complexity but also supports their development as thoughtful, compassionate, and responsible individuals capable of contributing positively to their communities. Ultimately, this model encourages educators and researchers to envision character education not merely as teaching about virtue, but as creating the conditions in which virtue can be lived, practiced, and internalized.

References

- Ainsley, K. (2017). Virtue ethics. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies. Oxford University Press and the International Studies Association.
- Annas, J. (2011). *Intelligent virtue*. Oxford University Press.
- Aristotle. (1925). Nichomachean ethics: Book II. (W.D. Ross, Trans.). The Internet Classics Archive.
- Baldwin, A. L., Rector, B. K., & Alden, A. C. (2021). Physiological and behavioral benefits for people and horses during guided interactions. *Behavioral Sciences*, 11(10), 129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11100129>
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Berkowitz, M., & Bier, M. (2005). *What Works in Character Education*.
- Birke, L., & Thompson, K. (2017). *Animal encounters: Contacts and concepts in human-animal relations*. Routledge.
- Callara, A. L., Scopa, C., Contalbrigo, L., Lanatà, A., Scilingo, E. P., Baragli, P., & Greco, A. (2024). Unveiling directional physiological coupling in human–horse interactions. *iScience*, 27(9), 110857. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2024.110857>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*.
- Dunning, D. (2017). *The Dunning–Kruger effect: On being ignorant of one’s own ignorance*. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 44, 247–296. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-385522-0.00005-6>
- EAGALA. (2008). *The EAGALA model*. Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On virtue ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2015). *Aristotelian character education*. Routledge.
- Lentini, J., & Knox, M. (2015). Equine-facilitated psychotherapy with children and adolescents: An update. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 10(3), 278–305.

- Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. Bantam Books.
- Narvaez, D. (2010). *Moral complexity: The fatal attraction of truthiness and the importance of experiential learning*. In L. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp. 367–392). Routledge.
- Nucci, L. P., & Narvaez, D. (2008). *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*. Routledge.
- Oldham, P., & McLoughlin, S. (2025). Character education research: A scoping review. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 74(2), 1–24.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2025.2557208>
- Pendry, P., & Roeter, S. (2013). Experimental trial demonstrates positive effects of equine facilitated learning on adolescent social competence. *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin*, 1(1), 1–19.
- Pendry, P., Smith, A. N., & Roeter, S. (2014). Randomized trial examining effects of equine facilitated learning on stress and behavior. *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin*, 2(1), 1–23.
- Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Schultz, P. (2017). *Horses as Partners in Learning: Experiential Approaches in Education*. Routledge.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, M. (2002). Six views of embodied cognition. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 9(4), 625–636.
- Yorke, J., Adams, C., & Coady, N. (2013). Therapeutic value of equine-human bonding. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 20(7), 587–596.

A Character Coaching Model for Student Success and Flourishing

Jeana M. Partin, EdD, Student Success Center, Carson-Newman University

Abstract

This paper introduces Carson-Newman University's Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol, a model designed to cultivate character and focus on performance virtues to strengthen academic success and student flourishing. Grounded in Lamb et al.'s (2022) Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue, the model integrates academic and character coaching with intentional character formation, using the Gallup CliftonStrengths and VIA character strengths assessments as coaching tools within that framework. After piloting the eight-week protocol in Fall 2024 with first-year student-athletes, a qualitative pilot study of twelve student-athletes was conducted to gain insight into student experiences with the model, and results were used to refine the protocol into a second version, subsequently used with first-year student-athletes and Academic Recovery students during the 2025-26 academic year. This paper describes the protocol's conceptual foundations, details how each of the seven virtue strategies is operationalized within this second version, and shares early qualitative findings from the pilot study of the initial version, along with student success coaches' reflections from a separate, departmental program assessment. A fuller account of the research project, including its examination of cultural differences among first-year student-athletes, will be presented in a future publication.

Keywords: character education, virtue, success coaching, student flourishing, student-athletes, character strengths

A Character Coaching Model for Student Success and Flourishing

Lamb et al. (2022) define character as “the collection of stable, deep, and enduring dispositions that define who we are and shape how we characteristically think, feel, and act.” James Arthur (2021) extends this understanding into a Christian framework, stating that “a Christian approach to habituating character virtues places emphasis on imitating Jesus Christ, who is the fullest expression of human nature and flourishing” (p. xv). Christian character, the possession of these virtues, relates us to God; according to Romans 8:29-30, Christians are called to conform to the image of Christ, a calling that requires the ongoing process of character formation. Hence, character formation grounded in these principles aligns with broader efforts to promote character development and flourishing in higher education.

An emphasis on character formation and flourishing has gained increasing attention over the past several years within higher education (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2021; Lamb et al., 2022; Wake Forest University, 2023). Character and leadership programs and centers are becoming more prominent at both private and public universities, a trend accelerated by philanthropic investments in universities by the Kern Family Foundation (Kern Family Foundation, n.d.) and Lilly Endowment’s (Wake Forest University, 2023) support of Wake Forest’s Program for Leadership and Character. Researchers are noting the need for more student-facing programs in higher education that emphasize character formation and virtue to promote practical wisdom and student flourishing (Glanzer, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2020; Lamb et al., 2022; Verhoef & Badley, 2021). Christ-centered, faith-based universities have long promoted these values through Biblical studies curricula, campus ministry, and an emphasis on imitating Christ’s teachings (Arthur, 2021); yet a more intentional focus on advising and coaching related to student flourishing has received increasing attention in higher education (Alzen et al., 2021; Verhoef & Badley, 2021).

This need is especially pronounced among students navigating academic transitions and setbacks. First-year college athletes face the challenge of balancing academic and athletic requirements while navigating new college experiences (Garcia et al., 2023; Sato et al., 2018), and they often struggle to make the connection between the discipline required in athletic practice and the discipline needed to achieve academic success (Albert et al., 2022; Gayles & Hu, 2009). This pattern highlights the importance of what the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2021) describes as performance virtues, including resilience, determination, confidence, and perseverance, which function instrumentally to enable the expression of other virtues in practice. Similarly, students on academic probation stand to benefit from the intentional cultivation of these performance virtues as they navigate the discipline and self-regulation required for academic success (Duckworth et al., 2019; Luthans et al., 2022). Individualized coaching interventions have produced moderate-to-large improvements in earned GPA for these students, particularly when coaches are proactive, collaborative, and hold students accountable (Campbell & Mogashana, 2025; Vanacore & Dahan, 2021). Character strengths coaching offers a promising response across both populations. Character strengths are related to positive measures of well-being and academic achievement (Karris Bachik et al., 2020), and strengths-based coaching provides a practical framework for helping students intentionally identify, develop, and apply these strengths in pursuit of academic success and flourishing (Niemiec & Cacioppo, 2024).

Institutional Context

In 2021, Carson-Newman University's Trustees and Executive Leadership Team launched the *Acorns to Oaks* five-year strategic plan, reaffirming the university's commitment to thoughtful and rigorous Christian higher education. Informed by the Christian intellectual tradition and a Christian anthropology that views humanity as created in God's image and called to flourish according to God's purposes, the strategic plan prioritized the university's mission of helping students reach their full potential as educated citizens and worldwide servant leaders. Guided by these institutional commitments, the Student Success Center launched the Developing Character Toward Student Success and Flourishing Initiative. With support from a Wake Forest Educating Character Initiative (ECI) Capacity-Building Grant, the Student Success team developed the Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol as part of this initiative and in response to the needs of the student populations served. Grounded in Lamb et al.'s (2022) Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue, the protocol was designed to support student success and flourishing through intentional character development. The protocol was piloted with first-year student-athletes in Fall 2024, refined through qualitative program evaluation, and expanded to Academic Recovery students during the 2025–26 academic year, with implementation planned for Academic Skills Enhancement (ASE) students in 2026–27.

The Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol

C-N's Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol is grounded in the Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue outlined by Lamb et al. (2022). The protocol pairs first-year student-athletes and Academic Recovery students with a Student Success coach for eight weeks of coaching sessions built around a balance of conversation, coaching prompts, and in-session exercises, with each week anchored to one of the seven strategies. Within this framework, coaches use two coaching tools: Gallup's CliftonStrengths (CS) assessment (Gallup, n.d.), used in Weeks 1 through 5, and the VIA Survey of Character Strengths (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.), used in Weeks 6 and 7. The “Name It, Claim It, Aim It” (NCA) method (Gallup, 2019) is used throughout as a recurring exercise to help students apply their strengths to real-life academic, athletic, and personal situations, and Scripture is woven throughout the coaching sessions, connecting biblical principles to CliftonStrengths themes and specific verses to individual VIA character strengths, an emphasis expanded in this second version of the protocol. Table 1 summarizes the eight-week protocol, and the sections below describe the primary emphasis and activities associated with the week in which each strategy was introduced.

Table 1

Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol: Eight-Week Overview

Week	Seven Strategies Focus	Purpose
1	Language	Relationship building and introduction of new character language
2	Reflection	Connect past experiences to knowledge of natural talents

3	Practice	Prompt action through student empowerment to make, pursue, and accomplish goals
4	Reminders	Learn how to use natural talents and connect to real-life situations
5	Friendships	Recognize how character strengths are used when engaging others
6	Systems	Exposure to systems where talents can flourish
7	Role Models	Connection of character strengths to those who made an impact
8	Sampling of all seven	Awareness of the impact leaning into character strengths can have daily

Note. Seven Strategies Focus reflects Lamb et al.'s (2022) Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue.

Language (Week 1: Getting to Know You)

The purpose of this week was relationship building and the introduction of a shared language for discussing strengths and character, reflecting Lamb et al.'s (2022) Language strategy. Throughout the coaching process, coaches and students discussed intellectual empathy, CliftonStrengths, VIA, and Scripture, and engaged in dialogue to verbalize insights on virtues and strengths that foster personal growth. During Week 1, students watched short videos to understand their Top 5 CliftonStrengths, reviewed their assessment reports, and completed Gallup's (2019) "First Impressions Discussion Guide."

Reflection (Week 2: Digging Deeper)

The purpose of this week was to connect past experiences to a deeper knowledge of natural talents, reflecting Lamb et al.'s (2022) Reflection strategy. Throughout the coaching process, students revisited their Top 5 CliftonStrengths for repetition and retention, and coaches asked open-ended questions to help students reflect on challenging or successful situations and what they learned from them, including how they used their strengths to make good decisions and an awareness of their "shadow sides" or blind spots. In Week 2, students explored their Top 5 themes using Gallup's (2022) "Theme Insight Cards" and completed the "Talents in Action" exercise (Gallup, 2019).

Practice (Week 3: Knowledge to Action)

The purpose of this week was to prompt action through student empowerment to make, pursue, and accomplish goals, reflecting Lamb et al.'s (2022) Practice strategy. Students consistently reviewed the Top 5 CS and practiced the "Name It, Claim It, Aim It" (NCA) method, which students used to address real-life examples and practice "leaning into" their strengths. In Week 3, students engaged in action planning using their Top 5 CliftonStrengths Theme Insight Cards, identified and discussed application areas across life, work, studies, and sport, and completed an "Individual Development Plan" exercise (Gallup, 2019).

Reminders (Week 4: Aiming Strengths)

The purpose of this week was to help students learn how to use their natural talents and connect them to real-life situations, reflecting Lamb et al.'s (2022) Reminders strategy. In Week 4, students completed a weekly NCA exercise check-in and worked through the “What Strength Would I Use...” exercise, applying their Top 5 Theme Insight Cards to three scenarios: completing a difficult project or assignment, meeting new people at an event, and managing feelings of exhaustion, being overwhelmed, stress, or homesickness. Coaches also discussed emotional and self-regulation concepts and revisited real-life problem-solving scenarios from coursework.

Friendships (Week 5: Theme Energizers)

The purpose of this week was to help students recognize how their strengths are used when engaging with others, reflecting Lamb et al.'s (2022) Friendships strategy. Week 5 focused on the importance of developing strong friendships and included a life check-in related to social and campus engagement. Students completed Gallup's “Bring/Needs” assessment (Gallup, 2019) and discussed what their strengths require of others to be at their best, along with how their strength blind spots are perceived and managed by others. The activities of this week's protocol emphasized that students become their best selves when supported by friendships of mutual accountability.

Systems (Week 6: Your Place and Passion)

The purpose of this week was to expose students to the systems within which their talents can flourish, reflecting Lamb et al.'s (2022) Systems strategy. In Week 6, students transitioned to the VIA assessment, reviewing their “VIA 24” results and reflecting on the difference between “heart” and “head” talents. Coaches held open discussions about the campus support systems available to students, including spiritual, wellness, and academic resources, and familiarized students with the University's mission and values, NCAA guidelines, the Student Handbook, and academic and discipline policies.

Role Models (Week 7: Your Purpose and Impact)

The purpose of this week was to connect students' strengths to the people who made an impact on their lives, reflecting Lamb et al.'s (2022) Role Models strategy. In Week 7, coaches asked students to review their Top 5 VIA strengths and discuss role models and mentors, both on and off campus, who reflect those strengths. Coaching prompts included naming a mentor or hero who positively influenced the student, describing how that person influenced them, and identifying which of the student's own top strengths reflect those influences.

Week 8: The Wrap-Up (Sampling of All Seven Strategies)

The purpose of this week was to build awareness of the impact that intentionally leaning into one's strengths can have on a daily basis. The final week sampled all seven strategies. Students named their Top 5 combined CliftonStrengths and VIA themes, reflected on what they liked about the coaching experience and what they gained from it, and discussed concrete action steps for continued, intentional engagement with their strengths moving forward, along with the availability of continued coaching.

Evaluating the Initial Protocol: A Qualitative Pilot Study

To gain insight into student experiences with the coaching model, a basic qualitative study was conducted with twelve first-year football players who completed the eight-week Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol during the Fall 2024 semester. Using Lamb et al.'s (2022) Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue as both a design guide and an analytic lens, the study asked: (a) How do Carson-Newman University first-year athletes' success coaching and coursework experiences develop character toward student flourishing? and (b) How do Carson-Newman University first-year athletes perceive the coaching sessions and coursework based on cultural differences? Semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim, and data were analyzed using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Six themes emerged from the data: reflecting on and practicing strengths; moral challenges and decision-making; influential figures and support systems; cultural differences and belonging; self-discipline and coaching accountability; and spiritual and personal growth. Results from this pilot study were used to refine the protocol into a second version, subsequently implemented with Academic Recovery students during the 2025-26 academic year.

Student Reflections and Analysis

Students' reflections illustrated how the coaching process fostered character development, self-regulation, and flourishing across the six recurring themes. Students described reflecting on and applying their strengths in daily situations, as when Carl explained that he tried to "lead by example" for teammates despite his natural quietness. Several recounted moral challenges that tested their values, exemplified by Kenneth's account of a "turning point" in which he chose loyalty to his team over a compromising decision. Students also credited influential figures and support systems, such as a father who modeled discipline and compassion, and described navigating cultural differences by finding common ground with teammates from different backgrounds through their shared choice of a Christian university. Reports of strengthened self-discipline and coaching accountability were common, as students noted that structured goal setting made follow-through easier, and several described deepening spiritual and personal growth, turning to prayer to manage frustration and stress. Together, these themes suggest that the protocol supported students' academic engagement alongside their broader development of character and practical wisdom.

A fuller account of this research, including the complete qualitative analysis of the twelve participating first-year athletes and its exploration of cultural differences in students' coaching and coursework experiences, is being prepared for a future publication.

Coach Observations from Program Assessment

In addition to the qualitative pilot study of student-athletes described above, C-N's Student Success Center gathered reflections from success coaches as part of a routine assessment of the protocol. These coach reflections were not part of the IRB-approved research study and were not collected or analyzed as formal research data; rather, they were shared voluntarily as part of ongoing program evaluation. Coaches consented to have de-identified excerpts of their reflections used in professional presentations and publications, including this paper.

Coaches similarly observed meaningful growth among the students they worked with. One coach noted that a student's Achiever theme translated into the sustained effort needed to

meet her academic goals, and after three semesters on academic probation, she completed her coaching no longer on probation. Another coach described a student who initially struggled to extend her natural Consistency strength from her work routine to her coursework, but once she recognized this pattern, she was able to prioritize her academic responsibilities. A third coach observed a more comprehensive turnaround, as a student's growing engagement with peers, instructors, and campus organizations—drawing on her Relator, Harmony, and Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence strengths—coincided with new leadership roles, a field experience abroad, and an increase in her GPA from 1.8 to 3.1. Together, these reflections suggest that coaches observed the same pattern noted in the student interviews: students who applied their character strengths showed corresponding gains in academic follow-through and self-awareness.

Future Directions

Following its revision, the Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol has been used with first-year student-athletes and Academic Recovery students during the 2025-26 academic year and will extend to Academic Skills Enhancement (ASE) students, Carson-Newman's highest-risk incoming population, during the 2026-27 academic year. C-N has also incorporated strengths assessments into its First-Year Experience course with a focus on vocation. These expansions are part of a broader, university-wide Developing Character Toward Student Success and Flourishing initiative, funded through a Wake Forest Educating Character Initiative Capacity-Building Grant, which is integrating character development and student flourishing into C-N's academic advising, coaching, mentoring, and curriculum.

Conclusion

C-N University is committed to developing the whole student, helping each one flourish and succeed academically and spiritually while using their God-given gifts to serve their community and beyond. The Character & Flourishing Coaching Protocol, grounded in Lamb et al.'s (2022) Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue and delivered through the CliftonStrengths and VIA resources, gives Student Success coaches a structured, relational way to help students cultivate virtue through language, reflection, practice, and mentorship. Early qualitative findings suggest that academic and character coaching helps C-N student-athletes reflect on their strengths, develop self-discipline and self-regulation, and cultivate the practical wisdom needed to become servant leaders. C-N's Student Success Center will continue to refine and expand this protocol, with the full research study to be shared in a future publication.

References

- Albert, E., Petrie, T. A., & Moore, E. W. G. (2022). Achievement motivation and grit's perseverance of effort among collegiate athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 22(3), 681-696. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2022.2161100>
- Alzen, J. L., Burkhardt, A., Diaz-Bilello, E., Elder, E., Sepulveda, A., Blankenheim, A., & Board, L. (2021). Academic coaching and its relationship to student performance, retention, and credit completion. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46(5), 539-563.
- Arthur, J. (2021). *A Christian education in the virtues: Character formation and human flourishing*. Routledge.
- Campbell, A. L., & Mogashana, D. (2025). Assessing the effectiveness of academic coaching interventions for student success in higher education: A systematic review. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 62(4), 1325-1347.
- Duckworth, A. L., Taxer, J. L., Eskreis-Winkler, L., Galla, B. M., & Gross, J. J. (2019). Self-control and academic achievement. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 70, 373-399.
- Gallup. (n.d.). *CliftonStrengths assessment*. <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths>
- Gallup. (2019). *CliftonStrengths coaching activities: First impressions discussion guide, talents in action, and individual development plan*. Gallup Press.
- Gallup. (2022). *CliftonStrengths theme insight cards*. Gallup Press.
- Garcia, A. J., Fong, C. J., & Regalado, Y. M. (2023). Motivational, identity-based, and self-regulatory factors associated with academic achievement of US collegiate student-athletes: A meta-analytic investigation. *Educational Psychology Review*, 35, Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09730-8>
- Gayles, J. G., & Hu, S. (2009). The influence of student engagement and sport participation on college outcomes among division I student athletes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(3), 315-333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2009.11779015>
- Glanzer, P. L. (2022). *Identity excellence: A theory of moral expertise for higher education*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2021). *Character education in universities: A framework for flourishing*. University of Birmingham.

https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Character_Education_in_Universities_Final_Edit-1.pdf

- Karris Bachik, M. A., Carey, G., & Craighead, W. E. (2020). VIA character strengths among U.S. college students and their associations with happiness, well-being, resiliency, academic success, and psychopathology. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 16(4), 512-525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1752785>
- Kern Family Foundation. (n.d.). *Empowering the rising generation*. <https://www.kffdn.org/>
- Kristjánsson, K. (2020). *Flourishing as the aim of education: A neo-Aristotelian view*. Routledge.
- Lamb, M., Brant, J., & Brooks, E. (2022). Seven strategies for cultivating virtue in the university. In J. Brant, E. Brooks, & M. Lamb (Eds.), *Cultivating virtue in the university* (pp. 115–156). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197599075.003.0007>
- Luthans, B. C., Luthans, K. W., & Chaffin, T. D. (2022). Character matters: The mediational impact of self-regulation on PsyCap and academic performance. *Journal of Education for Business*, 97(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2021.1874856>
- Niemiec, R. M., & Cacioppo, D. (2024). Coaching and character strengths—An essential, inextricable interconnection: Core practices and new science. *Journal of Positive Psychology Coaching*, 1, 1-24.
- Sato, T., Eckert, K., & Turner, S. L. (2018). Perceptions of black student-athletes about academic mentorship at a predominantly white institution in higher education. *The Urban Review*, 50, 559-583. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-018-0456-y>
- Vanacore, S. M., & Dahan, T. A. (2021). Assessing the effectiveness of a coaching intervention for students on academic probation. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 51(1), 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10790195.2019.1684855>
- Verhoef, M., & Badley, K. (2021). Reimagining character formation in the Christian university in challenging times. *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 25(3), 265-276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20569971211008947>
- VIA Institute on Character. (n.d.). *VIA Survey of Character Strengths*. <https://www.viacharacter.org>
- Wake Forest University. (2023, January 24). *Wake Forest University awarded \$30M Lilly Endowment Inc. grant to build national capacity for character education* [Press release]. Wake Forest News. <https://news.wfu.edu/2023/01/24/wake-forest-university-awarded-30m-lilly-endowment-inc-grant-to-build-national-capacity-for-character-education/>

**Cultivating the Common Good:
Transforming the Academic Workplace into a Community of Character**

Clara Gerhardt, PhD, Samford University

Kara M. Chism, EdD, Samford University

Abstract

The integration of character education and the concomitant values into the higher education workplace is vital for institutional flourishing. This article explores strategies for transforming professional environments into "communities of character" by aligning daily operations with core values like integrity, respect, and humility. It emphasizes the importance of practical implementation methods, including collaborative initiatives and value-based professional development. Fostering a virtue-centric atmosphere enhances employee engagement, reduces ethical friction, and models excellence for the student body. By prioritizing character, institutions can move beyond mere compliance to create a transformative culture of mutual respect and shared purpose.

Cultivating the Common Good: Transforming the Academic Workplace into a Community of Character

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” (Aristotle)

The concept of values in education has resurfaced repeatedly throughout history. It is first documented in the work of the ancient Greek philosophers, and Aristotle (ca. 325 B.C.E./1925) states, "Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly."

Character education as a movement in educational contexts emphasizes values and the expression of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that exemplify social virtues. It represents an intentional focus on doing the right thing by acting out our ethical values which in turn guide conduct. In the Samford University context, it has found expression in a campus wide intentionality surrounding “*Faith and Learning*” practices, whereby faith-based values are infused into teaching and learning

(<https://www.samford.edu/education/communities-of-character>). When shared values are intentionally cultivated through institutional practices, such as Samford is doing, character and community are developed.

Character Education as a Vehicle for Transformation

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, institutions dedicate vast resources to supporting, measuring, and fostering academic rigor. Universities use standardized metrics: research productivity, rankings, grant acquisitions, and technological infrastructure as indicators of their position in relation to their peers. Beneath this visible framework of syllabi, examinations, and scholarly output lies a powerful, parallel educational force in the form of the moral, ethical, and relational climate of the university workplace. It is this setting and these attributes that are addressed through “character education” in higher education.

In schools where there is an intentional focus on character education and literacy surrounding virtues, several strategies are deployed to bring awareness and relevance to this dimension (Lamb & Brooks, 2026). The concept of a *hidden curriculum* typically describes the unwritten behaviors, perspectives, and values that students learn by navigating educational environments (Wathani & Johan, 2026). In the context of character informed practices, the focus on virtues education is very intentional and places certain topics into the spotlight so that they gain prominence through emphasis.

In higher education this infusion of virtues-based pedagogic approaches takes on an added layer of complexity. The values are assimilated by students from their instructors and by observing modeled behaviors. Daily professional interactions and ethical choices modeled by faculty actively generate and sustain the school’s values. The workplace culture of a university forms the foundation for academic instruction. When an institution’s internal workplace climate becomes cohesive through collegiality, effective administrative systems, and general engagement, the mission of educating students of character is supported. The institute’s values should be visible and present in the educational environment, and in many schools of character these virtues are prominently displayed in the educational environment and serve as reinforcement to maintain focus on their importance.

The value and reason for the intentionality and prominence of a virtues informed educational setting are manifold. According to Lamb and Brooks (2026) this angle provides a

common language of how we can talk about character to keep it on the forefront. Core values provides us with a moral vocabulary, which supports moral perception and can provide the guiding thread for virtuous thoughts, feelings and actions. Importantly there is intentionality in creating a clear focus on character development and accompanying accountability (Lamb & Brooks, 2026).

Intentional character education is initially directed at and by faculty and staff, especially those able to influence the educational culture within their setting. Explicit teaching of character represents one of the early pillars supporting a community of character. Character education soon filters throughout the system and progresses to the student body. Honor codes, seminars, and student leadership workshops to instill virtues like integrity, civility, and civic responsibility will resonate if they are amplified and modeled by the faculty and staff in their educational roles.

To build a genuinely cohesive community of character, higher education acknowledges that faculty and staff go beyond delivering a curriculum or implementing an administrative infrastructure; they are the primary moral models of their institution. This requires an intentional strategy to cultivate a professional academic community, vested in supporting an environment and exemplifying principles of character (Brooks & Lamb, 2026).

The Virtue-Based Workplace

A virtue-based workplace operates on a dynamic premise: character is not a fixed trait, but an evolving constellation of practices, habits, and dispositions that can be intentionally cultivated, exercised, and strengthened over time. An institution develops ethical strength through the deliberate cultivation of institutional habits. Virtues such as intellectual humility, justice, courage, temperance, and compassion are professional competencies that require practice, reflection, and systemic reinforcement. Several dimensions are addressed (Diaz, 2026):

The behavioral dimension involves relatively small interactions that occur multiple times a day across campus. It is found in how a tenured professor listens to an adjunct faculty member during a department meeting. It is found in the tone an admissions director uses when addressing an overworked administrative assistant, or the transparency a dean exhibits when distributing limited departmental travel funds. In a virtue-based workplace, these smaller interactions are guided by an awareness that words and actions contribute to the ethical ecosystem.

The structural dimension of character education does not exist in a vacuum; it requires supportive architecture. The structural dimension is represented by the formal habits, policies, and processes of the institution. It includes for instance how search committees conduct hiring, how performance evaluations are structured, and how tenure and promotion guidelines are implemented. A virtue-based workplace is aligned to actively incentivize virtue.

The relational dimension recognizes that individuals thrive in environments characterized by high trust and mutual respect. By fostering genuine, cross-functional relationships rooted in shared values, the institution builds and maintains its social capital.

The journey towards a virtue-based workplace requires a systematic, practical approach. Most universities display inspiring mission statements referencing words like *excellence*, *integrity*, and *service*. Institutions flourish when they implement these ideals into a practical reality. Once the cultural ideals are identified, the institution can align its practices to reward structures that celebrate the values and the people who build community capital. Character education is integrated directly into the professional development calendar, ensuring that faculty and staff are given the time, space, and institutional permission to engage in developmental activities during their normal working hours. This encourages ethical reasoning, and constructive

dialogue. The goal is assimilation, where a virtue-based approach becomes the accepted way of doing things.

The Multi-Dimensional Benefits of Character Education

Investing in an intentional character education framework for faculty and staff enhances the well-being of individual employees as well as the operational resilience of the entire institution. For individual faculty and staff members, the presence of a virtue-based workplace environment fundamentally alters their daily experience. A culture rooted in virtues like humility, integrity, respect and responsibility allows faculty and staff to channel their creative and intellectual energies into their primary tasks: teaching, mentoring, conducting research, and serving students. Work is transformed into a meaningful avenue for professional flourishing.

For the institution, the cultivation of a workplace supporting values of character, this approach serves as a powerful protective shield that supports talent retention. When an institution offers a workplace characterized by collegiality, mutual respect, clear values, and a sense of true belonging, it becomes a magnet for high-caliber professionals.

A values-based community focuses on supporting and strengthening human potential. It asks aspirational, character-based questions such as: *"What is the excellent, just, and honorable thing to do in this situation?"* Ethics reach beyond specialized knowledge, through the conscious desire for right conduct directed toward constructive ends. These values become deeply ingrained and are enacted automatically as expressions of personal virtue. Reliance on internal moral development, and the traditional frameworks of character education, are structurally fortified.

A values-based framework inspires internal motivation and mutual, relational accountability. It presumes that faculty and staff want to be proud of their workplace and can pursue high ideals when adequately supported. Policies become representative of the community's shared values, and the focus is on creating and maintaining a flourishing community (Chowdhury & Alzarrad, 2025).

Character Education and Resilience

To support mental health and better global outcomes, we need to work from *within* (strengthening the individual towards greater resilience) as well as from *without* (by changing systemic influences). The focus on character education and creating systems where shared values are taught, caught, and implemented in schools, families, and communities is a powerful tool for meeting global challenges by recognizing and responding to contextual (environmental) factors (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

Establishing a workplace of character represents the creation of an ecosystem. When faculty and staff actively embody a virtue-based culture, the campus environment undergoes a transformation. The curriculum of character aligns with the explicit curriculum. This alignment creates a coherent moral ecosystem. The values taught in classrooms, ethics seminars, and workshops are reinforced by the observable behaviors of the people who maintain the campus infrastructure and facilitate the learning environment. Character education can represent a rigorous, permanent investment in the university's primary asset: its people.

By intentionally cultivating a virtue-based workplace, higher education leaders can bridge the gap between their highest ideals and their daily operations. When the university workplace reflects an active commitment to core virtues, it builds a resilient professional

community, unlocks individual human flourishing, and creates a ripple effect that transforms the student body.

Examples of Application

The Hope Institute is a non-profit that partners with school leaders to cultivate character development (Hopeinsitute.org, 2026). The organization provides training to educators and leaders via a three year in person training called Hope Leadership Academy. A team of four people, including an administrator, attend four to six annual content sessions on character development. The sessions provide time for teams to develop their own character while designing intentional practices to implement in their schools to shape character and community.

Another initiative for character that helps educators use shared language about common values is *Coaches for Character* which is implemented in local school districts in the metropolitan Birmingham, Alabama USA area. *Coaches for Character* is affiliated with Samford University and led by alumnus Laura Casey '22 and dean Anna McEwan. Participants are athletic coaches who learn from character education leaders and aim to develop character in their student athletes, create a team culture of character, and foster character-focused parent and community relationships. More broadly, *Coaches for Character* extends the work of numerous schools that have participated in the Hope Leadership Academy to transforming lives and to creating a community of character.

As an example of the choice of themes and emphasis on character, we quote the core values of the School of Education at Samford University, where we commit to the following core values as chosen by the staff and faculty:

INTEGRITY- Being authentic; acting the same way with all people, in all situations; acting in ways that demonstrate belief in the importance of being *honest* and behaving ethically.

RESPECT- Being respectful; acting in ways that demonstrate the belief that all people have worth and should be treated with dignity; demonstrating *love and compassion* for all people; acting in ways that demonstrate the belief that all people can contribute, and that *collaboration and teamwork* are desirable.

RESPONSIBILITY- Being responsible; acting in ways that demonstrate a belief in the importance of fulfilling individual and collective commitments, serving others, making positive contributions, working with *purpose*, and advocating for people and causes.

HUMILITY-Being humble; acting in ways that are not prideful or arrogant; *serving* others; demonstrating a commitment to *continuous learning* and a teachable spirit, both intellectually and personally

The school of education spent time determining the values of the school. Once the values was agreed upon, definitions of the four core values were created to ensure everyone in the school of education has a shared language.

Conclusion

Ultimately, by modeling an internal culture of integrity, deep mutual respect, and shared purpose, the university and its employees fulfill its highest obligation to the broader world, namely as serving as an authentic beacon of ethical excellence and an anchor of hope for generations to come.

Recommended Reading

Brant, J., Brooks, E., & Lamb, M. (Eds.). (2022). *Cultivating virtue in the university*. Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge Samford University in providing support to study virtues-based education at the Jubilee Center, University of Birmingham, UK, June 2026.

References

- Aristotle. (1925). *Nicomachean ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). The Internet Classics Archive. mit.edu (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.)
- Brant, J., Brooks, E., & Lamb, M. (Eds.). (2022). *Cultivating virtue in the university*. Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, E., & Lamb, M. (2026). Ten reasons why colleges and universities should educate character. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1-23.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2026.2624852>
- Chowdhury, S., & Alzarrad, A. (2025). Advancing community-based education: Strategies, challenges, and future directions for scaling impact in higher education. *Trends in Higher Education*, 4(2), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu4020021>
- Díaz, I. C. (2026). Character education with vulnerable children and adolescents in non-formal contexts: A systematic review. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 139, 103052. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2026.103052>
- Hope Institute (2026, August 30). <https://www.hopeinstitute.org/>
- Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). *A framework for character education in schools* (3rd rev. ed.). University of Birmingham. <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/The-Jubilee-Centre-Framework-for-Character-Education-in-Schools.pdf>
- Lamb, M., & Brooks, E. (2026). Teaching virtue literacy: A strategy for character education in the university. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2026.2620830>
- Wathani, D. H., & Johan, R. C. (2026). Exploring hidden curriculum discourses in learning outcomes studies: A bibliometric analysis. *The Curriculum Journal*, 37(3), 603-620.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.70019>