Col. Richard L. Zellmann, 1st Space Brigade commander, teaches a class of cadets on technical aspects of research related to space exploration and aeronautics at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA). Faculty and instructors at USMA are expected to not only demonstrate a high level of competence in their academic fields but also to set an example of integrity and character as role models for the cadets with whom they associate and instruct. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

Developing Leaders of Character

It *Is* Our Job

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In a 6 April 2023 *Military Review* Online Exclusive article, Dr. Stephen J. Finn explored whether academy faculty at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) are positioned to teach character. He writes, "Teachers best serve their students by focusing their attention and energy on promoting intellectual and academic development rather than by trying to develop character in any significant way."[1] This article serves as a response to his assertion by broadening his conception of character and highlighting how faculty are likely already developing character.

Although we typically think of character or character education as centered around moral virtues, West Point's character program has adopted a far broader conception of character inspired by the Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues. In this view, character includes the following:

- Moral virtues (e.g., honesty, kindness, humility)
- Civic virtues (e.g., justice, inclusivity, loyalty)
- Performance virtues (e.g., determination, resilience, courage)
- Martial virtues (e.g., patriotism, discipline, obedience)
- Intellectual virtues (e.g., creativity, critical thinking, intellectual humility, love of learning)[2]

Take a look at that last one. Critical thinking? Creativity? Intellectual humility? Love of learning? Aren't those often the goals of an academic program? Absolutely! If faculty are developing stronger thinkers, they *are* developing character.

In fact, by nature of their role, faculty influence students' character, even beyond the intellectual virtues. Below, we will examine concrete ways that faculty develop character across domains by modeling, designing learning experiences, emphasizing academic integrity, and helping students respond to each other honestly, respectfully, and compassionately.

Role Modeling

As faculty, we stand in front of our students, interacting with them both in the classroom and one-on-one outside of the classroom. Whether we intend for it or not, our students learn from watching our behavior. Observational learning is well-accepted as one of the most powerful types of learning. In observational learning, students learn by watching the instructor and modeling or adopting observed behaviors and values of the instructor.[3] In fact, learning from exemplars is one of the most powerful ways our character is formed, as exemplars can provide inspiration and qualities to emulate.[4]

Emulating character occurs even when character is not explicitly taught. For example, in medicine and business, having an ethical role model influences ethical behavior.[5] Likewise, Bruce P. Elman emphasizes that law professors must conduct themselves in an ethical manner or risk undermining any ethics they try to teach in the curriculum.[6] He highlights the instructor as a character role model when he writes, "The law professor must be a professional: s/he must show commitment to the law, to the law school, and the university; s/he must be prepared to work hard, maintain his or her competence, treat everyone with respect and dignity, care for one's students, be honest, prize integrity, and trustworthiness, and tell the truth."[7]

So too, in the Army profession, role modeling is important. For example, the West Point Special Leader Development Program at USMA pairs a developmental coach with a cadet who is identified to have a character deficiency. The developmental coach is a staff or faculty member assigned to West Point to help the cadet examine and modify their behavior, thoughts, values, and beliefs. This process is done through guided reflection, journaling, and role modeling.

What can faculty at this same institution

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Col. Aaron Hill, deputy department head for the Department of Civil and Mechanical Engineering at West Point, conducts a class for cadets circa 2022. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy)

do that will influence character formation in all its students? We identify four virtues that we naturally display in the context of good teaching: *humility, curiosity, empathy, and respect.*

Academics can model *humility* in the classroom. As faculty, we are considered "subject-matter experts," but it is the rare faculty member who does not find the limits of their knowledge challenged by the questions students will throw their way. Saying "I am not sure" and "I never thought of it that way" is the beginning of modeling humility. When our students emulate intellectual humility, they are more likely to recognize that their beliefs might be wrong, helping them be more open-minded to learning.[8] Intellectual humility is associated with reflective thinking, need for cognition, intellectual engagement, curiosity, intellectual openness, and intrinsic motivation to learn.[9]

When a faculty member wonders out loud, asking, "I wonder if …" or "I would love to learn more about …," they are modeling *curiosity*, a staple virtue for creating lifelong learners.[10] Curiosity is considered the "key to unlocking intellectual virtuous inquiry" and enhances memory for learned material.[11] In his 2023 book *I, Human: AI, Automation, and the Quest to Reclaim What Makes Us Unique*, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic highlights that "in an age where all of the knowledge of the world—which seems very hard to quantify or even grasp—has been outsourced and can be crowdsourced, accessed, and retrieved on an on-demand, 24/7 basis, there is really no advantage in being knowledgeable."[12] Instead, the advantages come from asking questions and a hunger for knowledge that allows one to access and leverage the available information.

In a classroom, we model *respect* and *empathy* through our interactions with students. How do we respond to students' concerns? How do we respond when someone is challenging an idea we put forth? Do we respond with openness and try to understand the other's perspective? Are we using active listening?

Capt. Samuel Herbert, a systems engineering professor, briefs class of 2022 cadets prior to squad live-fire drills during the U.S. Military Academy's Cadet Field Training on 18 July 2019. Herbert is one of 119 members of the dean's faculty who assisted with summer training. (Photo by Brandon O'Conner, U.S. Army)

Mutual respect and understanding facilitates a stimulating learning environment that decreases fear of the unexplored and increases feelings of safety and appreciation.[13] Responding empathically to students' emotional, social, and academic needs and consideration of their interests is one aspect of good teaching.[14]

Designing Learning Experiences

As faculty, we design the learning experience through what we do in class, what our students read or do out of class, and how we assess our students. For example, do assignments require students to persevere? (Yes, *perseverance* is character.) Consider, for example, an assignment where students often do not master the work on the first try, where students might receive feedback and must revise their work. This iterative process can build resilience and perseverance.[15]

Curricular and pedagogical choices can influence students to have a growth mindset, the belief that change in a trait or ability is possible. Believing you *can* change is foundational for future character development. Do you communicate to your students that they *can* develop into better writers and thinkers? Using language that emphasizes that one can become a master (although they may not have mastered it *yet*), emphasizing challenge, and noting progress all contribute to a growth mindset.[16] For example, research from an engineering school concluded that open-ended design challenges were more likely to stimulate a growth mindset.[17]

Critical thinking is an important virtue to develop in future leaders for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous situations. Assignments or classroom discussions can stimulate thought by challenging previously held assumptions, asking students to evaluate different perspectives, or describe what a theory or model *doesn't* account for. You can ask a student why someone might disagree with them,
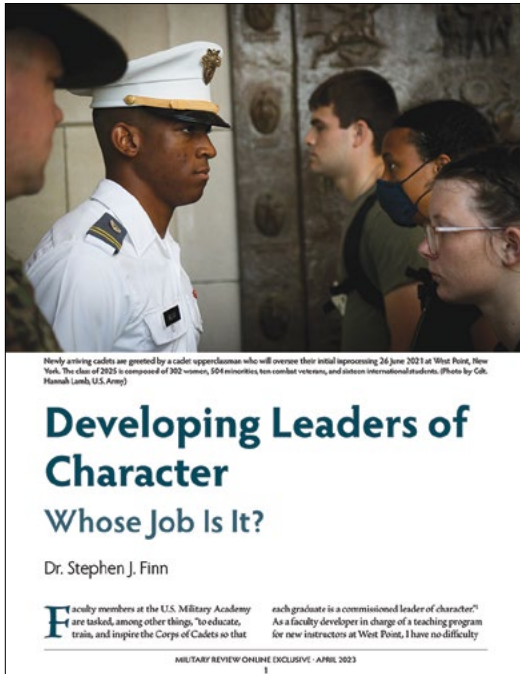
Dr. Stephen J. Finn's "Developing Leaders of Character" appeared as a *Military Review* Online Exclusive 6 April 2023. To read this article, visit https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2023-ole/finn/.

which is asking them to do what the military calls "Red Teaming."[18]

Whereas critical thinking is analytical and assesses the worth or validity of something that already exists, creativity, a more generative type of thinking, is also required for the Army profession.[19] Creativity, also considered a virtue, has been identified as an important twenty-first-century skill.[20] Creativity can be cultivated through role modeling, and encouraging students to tolerate ambiguity better, reframe problems, take prudent risks, and think divergently.[21] Educators can incentivize creative thinking, provide time for creativity, and provide materials that allow for cross-fertilization between fields.[22]

We can build reflection into assignments or class time. Some subjects lend themselves to students easily connecting the material to themselves and their own growth. Various authors have made claims on reflection of personal experiences. Reflection on personal experience is considered a virtue-cultivating strategy and is important for the development of future leaders.[23] Furthermore, reflection is noted to have a positive effect on learning outcomes.[24] In particular, reflective self-assessment after an assignment can promote more self-regulated and motivated learners.[25] For example, after a group project, can students consider how they could have approached the task differently? Such a response mimics the after action review done in the Army profession, which provides a mutual understanding of strengths and weaknesses and allows leaders to incorporate that data to improve future iterations.[26]

Emphasizing Academic Honesty

Stories circulate in the media around cheating on college campuses.[27] Academic honesty is not a new concern, but it's harder to combat more than ever with new technological tools, such as open AI. More than ever, professors need to talk about the *why* behind academic honesty and not just the rules. Consider the following questions: Do you talk only about proper formatting of citations, or do you also remind them of the point of citing work? Do you talk about the importance of respect as it pertains to crediting other authors for original thoughts? Are students aware that academic integrity builds trust in the scholarly community and the institution? Honesty, respect, and fairness in academia improve decision-making and give value and credibility to teachers, learners, and researchers. When we teach the principles behind academic honesty policies, we are influencing our students' character.

Encouraging Students to Respond to Each Other Honestly, Respectfully, and Compassionately

In classes, students often must respond to each other's ideas, assertions, and projects. For example, in an American politics class at West Point, students debate whether we should have used the nuclear bomb in World War II. This kind of exercise helps students practice managing diverse points of view. In the case of USMA, we are training our students to work in diverse teams. Diversity in thought makes a team smarter because they focus more on facts, challenge assumptions, and offer new perspectives, and are generally more innovative.[28] Diversity of thought can reduce the errors that stem from individual and cognitive biases.[29] However, managing diverse teams requires respectful and honest communication skills; faculty can support the development of these skills through providing opportunities for practice and providing feedback.

Students benefit from learning how to give each other honest and compassionate feedback. Learning this skill can be crucial for future Army officers during counseling and development sessions. In the classroom, you can have students peer review each other's papers before they are graded, or they can give formative feedback during a practice presentation. This practice can help them build the skill of thinking critically and communicating honestly and compassionately.

Why Pay Attention to What We Likely Already Do?

If we as academics are already engaging in many of these highlighted behaviors that develop our students' character, then why be deliberate in our approach?

Explicitness about our role in character development allows us to make deliberate choices. Unfortunately, some of these practices might strike most instructors as extraneous. Faculty might think, "Sure, it's *nice* to give students an opportunity to communicate feedback, or it's nice to take the time to share my own failures. It's nice to smile at students and ask how they are doing. It's nice to talk about virtues like honesty and respect. However, these behaviors are not central to my role."

On the contrary! If we adopt that our role is to support the institutional mission, which is to develop leaders of character, we can suddenly view these peripheral moments as centrally important. Now, as a professor, we might say to ourselves, "Hold on, let me address that disrespectful comment the student made," or "Let me take a moment and acknowledge my own failure as an example," or "Let me have the students consider the opposite perspective." We might design our assessments with the skills of future leaders of character in mind. And we will certainly be more aware of our own behavior as a model to others.

Helping students connect academic moments to character development clarifies that character is central to honest, intellectual pursuits. This integration of character development, even in academic classes, facilitates the understanding that, in the Army organization, character is not relegated to only one class, one briefing, or one environment.

Conclusion

Let us explore the following analogy: a university recently develops a "writing across the curriculum" initiative, where good writing is no longer relegated to only English professors. After all, this makes sense. All academics must learn to communicate clearly and getting in repetitions from different contexts and receiving different types of feedback throughout the college years will only make them stronger writers. Now, imagine if a professor of geography says, "Writing is not what I teach or am trained in." We can easily see that this professor still has a role to play—maybe he will examine the paper from a slightly different lens than an English professor, but his assignment design and feedback will provide students with one more opportunity to develop their writing. So too, can all professors participate in the role of developing our students holistically. In the case of USMA, our mission is clear. The credibility of our Army depends heavily on the Nation's perception of West Point graduates becoming leaders of character. Integral to character education is that the whole environment operates systematically to foster good character formation, including the contextual elements surrounding students and the people around them.[30] We all play a role—civilian or military, academic or not—to shape the leaders of tomorrow who represent the best of our Nation. ∎

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

Notes

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