Newly arriving cadets are greeted by a cadet upperclassman who will oversee their initial inprocessing 26 June 2021 at West Point, New York. The class of 2025 is composed of 302 women, 504 minorities, ten combat veterans, and sixteen international students. (Photo by Cdt. Hannah Lamb, U.S. Army)

Developing Leaders of Character

Whose Job Is It?

Dr. Stephen J. Finn

Faculty members at the U.S. Military Academy are tasked, among other things, "to educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character."[1] As a faculty developer in charge of a teaching program for new instructors at West Point, I have no difficulty

providing pedagogical advice to faculty members to help them more effectively educate cadets. After all, there is no shortage of books and articles offering research-based strategies for gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to improve one's teaching. Yet, when it comes to providing advice to instructors on developing their students' characters, I am more reluctant to speak. This reluctance stems partly from my own lack of knowledge of character development research and how this research can inform effective practices in higher education classrooms. More importantly, however, my reluctance emerges from the belief that teachers, while in the classroom, should mostly avoid the task of character development. In what follows, I argue that even if character development is a legitimate goal for military academies and other institutions of higher education, which I believe it is, 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.

Many of my West Point colleagues seem to believe that character development plays a more fundamental role at military academies than at civilian institutions of higher education. Certainly, the idea of character development is included not only in the mission statements of the U.S. Military Academy but also in those of the U.S. Naval Academy and the U.S. Air Force Academy. The mission of the Naval Academy includes, among other things, to "develop Midshipmen, morally, mentally and physically."[2] Similarly, the Air Force Academy's mission seeks to "educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character."[3] At the same time, however, many civilian universities also see themselves in the business of developing leaders who will contribute to the betterment of society. As part of its mission, Yale University "educates aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society."[4] Harvard College seeks to "educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society," while Vanderbilt University aims to "bring out the best in humanity," among other things.[5] According to its vision statement, the University of Washington "educates a diverse student body to become responsible global citizens and future leaders."[6] Although these institutions do not explicitly use the term "character" in their mission statements, they clearly consider leader development as more than an academic affair. Furthermore, after extensive surveys and consultations with higher education faculty and administrators, the American Association of University and Colleges discovered a strong consensus on a list of "essential learning outcomes" that includes interpersonal skills and behaviors such as teamwork, ethical reasoning, and ethical action.[7] For the most part, higher education faculty members concur with the development of character as a legitimate goal. In the 2017 Higher Education Research Institute Faculty Survey, 85 percent of faculty members either agreed or strongly agreed that "helping students develop personal values was part of their role as professors."[8]

Agreement on the importance of character development as a goal of higher education, as might be expected, is not universal. One of the many dissenters, Stanley Fish, argues in *Save the World on Your Own Time* that colleges and universities should not be in the business of character development for many reasons. For the present purposes, however, I only focus on his argument that college teachers should "do their jobs." A college teacher, Fish says, has only two main tasks:

> (1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience; and
> (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills—of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure—that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over.[9]

An instructor, he says, ought to "academicize" topics when teaching

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Lt. Col. Frederick Black instructs a class of U.S. Military Academy cadets at West Point, New York, 21 April 2017. (Photo by Richard Drew, Associated Press)

them. Instead of asking students to explore their own opinions or divulge what they would do in hypothetical scenarios, teachers should simply analyze the arguments involved. The job of a higher education teachers, according to Fish, is "to detach it [a topic] from the context of its real world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed."[10] The goal should not be to produce leaders or citizens who will "save the world," he says, but simply to introduce students to academic topics and provide them with the intellectual skills required to properly address those topics. What the students do with such knowledge and skills, Fish claims, is completely up to them and should not be the teacher's concern:

> If by the end of the semester, you have given your students an overview of the subject (as defined by the course's title and description in the catalogue) and introduced them to the latest developments in the field and pointed them in directions they might follow should they wish to inquire further, then you have done your job. What they subsequently do with what you have done is their business and not anything you should be either held to account for or praised for.[11]

Of course, Fish acknowledges that academic knowledge often positively affects students' characters. An eye-opening academic experience and the attainment of knowledge may, for example, help a student find a path or vocation leading to a productive and socially responsible life. But this kind of effect is "contingent" and "should not be aimed for."[12]

Furthermore, Fish claims, faculty members are not well-suited for the task of character development. They are hired for their academic expertise, not because they are virtuous. "Teaching is a job," Fish claims, "and what it requires is not a superior sensibility or a purity of heart and intention—excellent teachers can

Col. Aaron Hill, a professor in the Civil and Mechanical Engineering Department, with cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy)

be absolutely terrible human beings, and exemplary human beings can be terrible teachers—but mastery of a craft."[13] Faculty members spend many years immersed in the learning of a particular subject matter, not in learning how to lead students toward the virtuous life. Those philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and others who study ethics usually do so from a theoretical and academic perspective. The fact that faculty members study ethical theory does not mean that they are good people capable of teaching others to be virtuous.

Even if it is desirable to help develop student characters, Fish claims, a university is not the place to do it, and university teachers are not the ones for the job. "I'm all for moral, civic, and creative capacities," Fish says, "but I'm not sure there is much I or anyone else could do as a teacher to develop them."[14] He continues by pointing out that "moral capacities (or their absence) have no relationship whatever to the reading of novels, or the running of statistical programs, or the execution of laboratory procedures, all of which can produce certain skills, but not moral states."[15]

For the present purposes, I do not wish to defend my view that Fish is wrong when he says institutions of higher education should not be in the business of character development. Others have argued against Fish in this matter, so I do not need to repeat those arguments here.[16] For example, I agree with Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben when they critique Fish by saying colleges and universities "play a substantial role in students' lives at a pivotal time of ethical exploration and identity formation … To eschew any concern with students' ethical development beyond the classroom, and to refuse to commit to moral virtues and ideals rooted in the liberal arts and democracy, is to abandon a sense of the value of a thoughtful life and of academy's value to society."[17] As a matter of fact, the mission statements of many higher education institutions, including military academies, declare that character development is of utmost importance. So, in some sense, Fish has lost the argument in practice, though possibly not in theory.

Although I believe that military academies should view character development as a legitimate outcome of their education, I am sympathetic to Fish's reasoning regarding a faculty member's responsibility in this matter. In what follows, therefore, I would like to stake out a middle ground between these conflicting opinions. On the one hand, I believe that military acade-

A number of studies have found that classes featuring vigorous discussions of challenging moral dilemmas do have a positive effect in helping students perceive ethical issues when they arise, take account of the arguments on all sides of the issue, and reach a conclusion on an appropriate course of action.[19]

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mies (and other institutions of higher learning) ought to consider character development as a goal but, on the other hand, that faculty members should mostly avoid seeing character development as a major part of their jobs. In the remainder of this article, I argue for three points related to this topic:

1. The task of character development belongs *primarily* to administrative departments of an institution and to a subset of faculty.

2. Faculty members can and should use methods and techniques to develop students' character in the classroom but only when doing so requires minimal training and little class time.

3. Faculty members should focus on the academic and intellectual development of their students as the best way to indirectly shape student characters.

Regarding the first point, I suggest the task of character development be assigned *primarily* to administrators and a subset of faculty. Given their specialized knowledge, faculty members should advance the institutional objectives that align with their education and not with those that lie outside their expertise. A history teacher, for example, should be responsible for learning outcomes related to critical analysis of historical facts and events but not responsible for outcomes related to mathematical reasoning. As pointed out by Derek Bok in *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?*, there are a number of things colleges and university administrators can do to "help students acquire higher standards of ethical behavior and personal responsibility."[18] For example, colleges can and should offer specific courses on moral reasoning and behavior. As Bok states,

Of course, the fact that students may discover an "appropriate course of action" does not necessarily mean they will act accordingly. Moral knowledge, in other words, does not automatically result in moral behavior. Nevertheless, even if such courses do help develop character, I suggest, they would (or should) be taught by people with specialized knowledge and, therefore, involves only a subset of faculty members. Bok also suggests that students be encouraged to participate in certain extracurricular activities such as community service or intramural sports that can have a positive effect on character.[20] This suggestion is similarly not directed at faculty members, but mostly at administrators.

To carry out the task of character development more efficiently, colleges and universities could establish centers comprised of trained specialists whose primary purpose is to focus on character development goals. At my own institution, for example, the William E. Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic and the Character Integration Advisory Group work together to develop courses, programs, and events that help cadets to become "leaders of character" with the goals of "living honorably and leading honorably."[21] I believe, as does Fish, that most faculty members do not have the proper knowledge and training to undertake the task of character development effectively. So, if courses are developed by such centers, faculty members teaching such courses should already have the requisite knowledge to teach them.

Time, of course, is a precious commodity in academia. Improving one's own teaching effectiveness in one's discipline requires time, as does satisfying the different scholarship and service requirements placed

on faculty members. At military institutions, faculty members are also expected to perform various forms of student development outside the of classroom such as serving as an advisor on a hobby club or sports team. By placing the task of character development mostly into the hands of a subset of faculty or administrators possessing the requisite knowledge, teachers of a discipline can focus more on the academic and intellectual development of their students, which is the heart of their jobs. Certainly, when a faculty member performs other roles involving students, such as advising a chess club, she has the time to influence students in a more personal and positive way. In the classroom, however, a teacher should spend most of her time on the primary task of teaching the academic content of the course. As pointed out by Daniel Willingham, trying new interventions in education involve an "opportunity cost."[22] "In education," Willingham says, "a Change [sic] almost always carries an opportunity cost. That is, when you spend your time and energy on one thing, you necessarily have less time and energy for something else."[23] My concern is that faculty members, by turning their attention too much in the direction of character development, may be overlooking or not discovering other pedagogical interventions that will help them accomplish the task of teaching one's disciplinary knowledge, which is itself a difficult task on its own.

The idea that a designated group of faculty members is responsible for character development would not go over well at West Point, where leadership frequently reminds us that every interaction between a faculty member and a cadet is a developmental opportunity. To be clear, I am not arguing faculty members should fully abdicate the task. Instead, and this is my second point, faculty members can and should use interventions in the classroom to help develop character *but only when doing so requires minimal training and/or little class time*. For example, Bok suggests that modeling ethical behavior is an effective way to promote similar behavior in the student body. "Another way in which colleges may have a significant impact on their students' character," Bok says, "is through the example set by the institution and its staff."[24] Bok does not specifically speak of teachers modeling behavior in the classroom but is mostly concerned with how unethical behavior outside of class is handled by the institution. At the institutional level, Bok claims, unethical behavior should

not be tolerated and must be adequately and promptly addressed. As Bok points out, there "is no surer way for campus officials to foster cynicism and undermine respect for the institution and its attempts to improve ethical standards than to refuse to act when students or staff members behave in morally indefensible ways."[25] Although Bok does not specifically refer to modeling good behavior in the classroom, it is certainly something faculty members could do and it does not require much effort or training, if any. Anecdotally, I find that "setting a good example" is the most likely response when I ask my colleagues what we can specifically do in the classroom to promote cadet character development. So, if we assume that acting like good role models has a positive impact on students' character, then faculty members should certainly do this. Although Fish believes good teachers can be unethical human beings, this does not mean they have the freedom to act unethically in a classroom.

In light of the above observations, one might ask, in an effort to encourage students toward the virtuous life, what behaviors are teachers supposed to model in the classroom? Certainly, I believe the answer to this question would include such things as treating students with respect, grading fairly, clearly stating expectations, being punctual, presenting a professional appearance, and other similar things. On this last point, due to West Point's emphasis on cadet character development, I am admittedly more attentive than I had been as an instructor at a civilian institution. So, for example, I make sure to tuck in my shirt, wear shoes (not sneakers), and keep my hair short and tidy. When working at a civilian institution, I did not always follow such practices, accepting that students are not offended or surprised by the appearance of a disheveled professor. But notice that at West Point, a clean appearance is an expected aspect of professional behavior, which is not directly related to character development. My point is that my job *as a teacher in a classroom* does not change *in any significant ways*, nor should it, on account of my institution's mission to develop leaders of character. All teachers should act ethically in their classrooms and thereby set a good example. These actions are simply those of acting professionally (and ethically). I suspect that even Fish, who bluntly states teachers can be "terrible human beings," might agree that they should nevertheless treat their students with respect, grade

fairly, avoiding demeaning language, arrive to class on time, and otherwise perform their duties as educators. Modeling good behavior clearly seems to be something teachers should do regardless of its effect on character. Furthermore, if modeling is effective at helping students acquire moral virtues (which is itself not an established fact), then we might have more reason to make sure we act ethically and professionally in the classroom. Yet, we should notice that most of the obligation for acting ethically in the classroom arises from

planning for the academic and intellectual development of their students as opposed to their character development. As Fish claims, it should not be a teacher's job to develop character since most teachers are not trained psychologists with knowledge of how to help students become ethical human beings. Faculty members are, for the most part, disciplinary experts with highly specialized knowledge and skills in a given academic field, and it is mostly this knowledge and skills they should be trying to impart to students.

> If modeling is effective at helping students acquire moral virtues (which is itself not an established fact), then we might have more reason to make sure we act ethically and professionally in the classroom.

our role as teachers, not from our role as developers of character. Modeling good behavior in the classroom, in other words, is something to be done regardless of its impact on character development.

Other than modeling good behavior, then, are there other ways to promote character development in the classroom that do not require much time and effort? During a recent faculty development workshop at West Point, a member of our Character Integration Advisory Group offered a few interesting suggestions that included, among other things, telling stories of virtuous role models.[26] Apparently, specific types of narratives are an excellent way to inspire and motivate people, especially when the role models described are "everyday exemplars" as opposed to saintly figures like Mother Theresa.[27] Another suggestion offered in the workshop was to encourage activities like reflection, self-monitoring, and goal setting. Although the effectiveness of such practices in classrooms has not been firmly established, research referenced by our West Point presenter suggests that they are effective in other settings. For the sake of argument, let us assume that such methods exist and that faculty members can learn and utilize them. If such practices require little training, do not use too much class time, and likely advance the intended outcome, including them in one's pedagogical approach is certainly reasonable.

However, and this leads to my third point, instructors should spend most of their preparation time on

Certainly, one can model good behavior and use minor interventions with the hope that this will positively affect students' behavior in the long term, but, other than that, it is probably best for one to expend most of one's energy in improving the teaching of disciplinary knowledge and skills. Instructor time with students is quite limited; telling too many stories about role models that are unrelated to disciplinary content or spending time on goal setting, for example, uses up precious class time that could be better used.

In the end, if faculty members wish to help their students "save the world" (or, in the case of military academies, be effective leaders), I suggest that focusing on the intellectual and academic development of these future leaders might be the best path to this goal. To solve the world's most pressing problems, such as those posed by climate change or global poverty, we must rely on experts who know how to conduct research, draw valid conclusions, perform statistical analysis, and, ultimately, to uncover the truth in the area being explored. Of course, many (if not most) students at military academies are not enrolled for such goals but are enrolled to learn skills necessary to succeed in the armed forces. Given our expertise in a specific discipline, our primary job as educators should be to provide students with the knowledge and skills that we ourselves have learned and to leave any significant attempts at character development to those more qualified to do it. ∎

The views expressed herein are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. government.

Notes

1. "The U.S. Military Academy at West Point: The Preeminent Leader Development Institution," U.S. Military Academy at West Point, accessed 14 February 2023, https://www.westpoint.edu/.

2. "Mission of USNA," U.S. Naval Academy, last updated 4 January 2019, accessed 14 February 2023, https://www.usna.edu/About/mission.php.

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5. "Mission, Vision, & History," Harvard College, accessed 14 February 2023, https://college.harvard.edu/about/mission-vision-history; "About," Vanderbilt University, accessed 14 February 2023, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/about/.

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7. Derek Bok, *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 18–19.

8. Ibid., 81.

9. Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12–13.

10. Ibid., 27.

11. Ibid., 58.

12. Ibid., 13.

13. Ibid., 53.

14. Ibid., 11.

15. Ibid.

16. For example, see Stanley Hauerwas, "The Pathos of the University: The Case of Stanley Fish," in *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*, ed. Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 92–110; see also Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben, "Aim High: A Response to Stanley Fish," in Kiss and Euben, *Debating Moral Education*, 57–75.

17. Kiss and Euben, "Aim High," 68.

18. Bok, *Higher Expectations*, 58.

19. Ibid., 62.

20. Ibid., 105.

21. "William E. Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic," U.S. Military Academy at West Point, accessed 14 February 2023, https://www.westpoint.edu/military/simon-center-for-the-professional-military-ethic.

22. Daniel Willingham, *When Can You Trust the Experts? How to Tell Good Science from Bad in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 204.

23. Ibid.

24. Bok, *Higher Expectations*, 66.

25. Ibid.

26. Peter Meindl, personal communication with author, 24 February 2022.

27. Ibid.