

## ***Competence without Character is our Greatest Threat***

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Recently, while facilitating a leadership seminar for outstanding high school juniors from across the country, we confirmed (anecdotally) that cheating is "alive-and-well."<sup>1</sup> Many students readily shared personal experiences regarding the various means employed to gain an unfair advantage, misrepresenting their level of academic competency. The justification, they explained, is *pressure* -- so intense that getting the desired "grade" is all that matters. They asserted that whether one is just trying to graduate from high school or gain acceptance to a top tier university, "whatever-it-takes" is the consensus philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Also of interest, those students who stated that they did not personally break faith with their teachers, were tolerant of those who did.<sup>3</sup>

As facilitators, we challenged our students to examine their behavior in light of their *values*. This effort required some serious introspection. For many, it was the first time they had genuinely asked themselves: "What do I really care about?" As our students recited and explained the fundamental principles (values) they believed should be guiding their decisions and actions, most included concepts such as: integrity, truth, fairness, and trust. None offered: power, fame, wealth, and popularity.<sup>4</sup> However, when challenged again to justify "intentional misrepresentation" (cheating) in light of their espoused values, some became defensive or confused. Maybe they were only voicing the values they thought we wanted to hear? Maybe *success* (however measured) was their real value? If so, how did they get to this point? Are we failing these students and the next generation of leaders?

Centuries ago Cicero observed, "Within the character of the citizen lies the welfare of the Republic."

([www.charactereducationohio.org/resource/citizenship/index.htm](http://www.charactereducationohio.org/resource/citizenship/index.htm)) President Lincoln opined, "The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next." ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)) Similarly, President Theodore Roosevelt admonished, "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." ([www.wikianswers.com](http://www.wikianswers.com))

However, developing a citizenry of character is a continuous and enduring effort. "Character is not formed in a week or a month. It is created little by little, day by day. Protracted and patient effort is needed to develop good character." (Heraclitus, [en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Heraclitus](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Heraclitus))

We believe a compelling empirical argument supports the following: "Competence *without* character is our greatest threat." This observation or discovery is not new to our generation. Clearly, the historical, objective evidence supports it. However, with advanced technology, those possessing great

competency, while lacking character can wreak far more harm today than in any previous era. Perhaps this is why Dr. Rush Kidder, President of the Institute for Global Ethics, warned, "We will not survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the ethics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." (Kidder, 1991, p 30) This clarion call demands our attention.

Several years ago, while visiting a public elementary school (cornerstone 1954, Jamestown, NY School District), we were impressed by the axiom etched in the stone archway adorning the main entrance: "**Character is the Goal of Education.**" If so, "What are we doing to achieve this goal?"

In our public schools, success is measured by indices such as test scores, graduation rates, and rates of collegiate matriculation. These are indicators of competency and progress among students. As such, we often hear that there is little time and motivation to "teach character." Others suggest that public schools cannot and should not teach ethics, values, or morals because these topics might violate personal preferences and individual rights. Sometimes, parents inquire, "Whose values will you teach?" Consequently, many educators assert that the development of student character rests with families, while the teachers' focus must be on student competencies -- amenable to testing. It appears we have a decision to make. Do we abandon the previously cited goal, etched in stone? Alternatively, is there a way to provide for both the development of competency and character, these two factors being perhaps the defining issues of our time? We believe we can and must do both. This solution requires no additional time or resources within the academic environment. This is our thesis and here is our argument.

Consider the process that develops competence in any activity. We discover four fundamental elements. *Instruction, study, and reflection* – providing knowledge and understanding. *Practice* – promoting our ability to adhere to desired norms and standards -- developing discipline. *Evaluation* – enabling both the instructor and the student to assess progress toward the desired level of performance (or standard) – engendering confidence and belief in the efficacy of what has been taught. *Experience* (perhaps the "best teacher") – providing challenges of the "real" world – developing leadership skills and wisdom. (Marrella, 2009 and USMA, 1998)

Not coincidentally, if we examine the process that develops character ("Those moral qualities that constitute a person's true nature, guiding one's decisions and actions." (USMA, 2002, p.16, 28), we discover it includes the same elements, cited above. By way of illustration, consider the manner in which responsible parents seek to raise responsible children. Parents *instruct* children in that which constitutes good decision making and behavior. They encourage children to read (*study*) material that will illustrate and reinforce their instruction. They expect children to put the lesson into *practice* within the family environment. When children conform or when they fail, parents offer positive reinforcement or appropriate admonition (*assessment*), as required. At the same time, they

provide children with the opportunity to *experience* life outside the home -- in school, through extracurricular activities, and interaction with friends and neighbors. Through this process children learn "what is right" (from their conscience), develop a belief-set (values), make attendant choices, and exercise the opportunity to influence others by their example (leadership). (Marrella, 2009) With this observation, it is clear why Horace Mann explained: "...education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery." (Mann, 1848) He understood that for the good of society, education must address not only matters that enable a person to be good at something, but also matters that encourage a person to be good. Demonstrated, consistent competence and character engender and sustain *trust*. Trust is the foundation for all successful relationships (*love & work* → *peace & happiness*). (Character Education Partnership, 2008)<sup>6</sup>

In many private schools and some public schools, commitment to the simultaneous goals of competence and character is stated or implied in their missions. Some try to attain these dual goals through separate programs or initiatives. Research shows that ethics or character education, when provided in stand-alone classes is useful. (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, Smith, 2006) However, this approach may not be the best way to foster moral reasoning and critical thinking. Further, "just posting character traits without modeling and fostering corresponding behaviors in the school or classroom culture is not only insufficient to produce significant character development in students, but may indeed breed cynicism." (Berkowitz, Bier, 2005)

The Character Education Partnership sponsored a review of several documented high school character programs and produced a report entitled, "What Works in Character Education." The intent was to assess, scientifically, the effectiveness of these efforts. Impressively, they found 33 character programs generating objective evidence to support their value in "promoting character development in students." However, the salient conclusion was that the best efforts were those that *integrated* character development within the curriculum. (Berkowitz, Bier, 2005)

Further, the major finding reported in *Smart & Good High Schools* concludes that "schools committed to help students become smart (in the multi-dimensional sense of learning) and to help them become good (in the multi-dimensional sense of moral maturity)" provide benchmarks for attaining excellence in both academics and ethics. This assessment is based on evaluations of theory, research, and common sense (wisdom from voices of experience). (Davidson, Lickona, 2005) In effect, those schools that take a serious look at themselves (assessment), align their ethics with their practices, and embrace character development in all aspects of school life achieve the greatest success. These schools graduate students of competence and character, providing the greatest contribution to their communities and society at-large.

Other investigators also cite specific examples where imbedding character within the curriculum has produced remarkable results. Ms. Kathleen Thompson combined her art class with character development as she taught students lessons involving Indonesian shadow puppets. (Farbman, 2006) Professor Joseph Badaracco, of Harvard University, wrote a book entitled, *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature*. Herein, he illustrated how one can teach ethics while studying fiction. Professor Badaracco attests that classic novels provide vivid, exciting, and unforgettable protagonists facing gripping challenges -- similar to those we may all face in our personal and professional lives. Through detailed examination of the main characters in tales such as, *The Secret Sharer*, *The Death of a Salesman*, *The Last Tycoon*, *Antigone*, and other masterpieces, teachers can help students understand the ethical principles motivating decisions and actions within the story lines. (Badaracco, 2006)

We can build on this theme, accepting the admonition of Socrates, "An unexamined life is not worth living." ([www.philosophypages.com/hy/2d.htm](http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2d.htm)) Instructors in English or philosophy may challenge students to write an expository essay entitled, "This is What I Believe In" or "This is What Matters to Me." Such exposition should be evaluated for competency of expression and clarity of thought while providing students the opportunity to reflect on their life's purpose and goals. At this point, a complementary essay should be assigned entitled, "And This is Why." Such exercises contribute to critical-thinking. In daily interactions with students, educators have noted how a simple and thoughtful adjustment can make a difference in their classrooms. A teacher, instead of saying, "I am really proud of your hard work!" may say, "You must be really proud of your hard work." This approach encourages students to reflect on their values. In its *Position Paper*, "Performance Values: Why They Matter and What Schools can Do to Foster Their Development," the Character Education Partnership (2008) identifies a robust strategy for simultaneously developing competence and character. The integration of effort to achieve these complementary goals is both symbiotic and synergistic. ([www.character.org/performance.values](http://www.character.org/performance.values))

The importance of developing character through education is understood and implemented in other societies, as well. The Russian system, as reported by Dr. Bronfenbrenner, PhD, an educator well-known in his country, declared that education must contribute to the "raising" of the child. This goal is viewed to be as important as the child's physical health and it is reflected in all school activities (encouraging students to embrace the values of the institution in all their endeavors). The Russians believe this approach promotes accountability and respect for others, while developing competencies. (Bronfenbrenner & Wertsch, 2005)

The Japanese view education as having three goals. The first addresses the student's spirit, or the "penchant for education." The second element is the cultivation of character or "kokoro." Finally, education must provide all students with equal opportunity to grow and learn to the limits of their ability (competency). The rote teaching of skills is referred to as "training," a matter far less important than the development of character. (Okamoto, 1992)

The importance of character development is certainly not lost on those who empirically demonstrate a value system antithetical to our own. For example, some families in Pakistan, especially the poor, send their children to study at "religious" schools, or *madrasas*. These schools imbue an ethos that supports "violent extremism." (Andrabi, Das, Khwaja, Zajone, 2005) While such development may seem inconsistent with *character as we understand it*, the teachers in these schools realize that the development of the nature of their students cannot be taken for granted. Thus, if they want students to embrace their values, they must be sure the students know these values, practice them, receive critical evaluation, and experience a "world-view" that reinforces their instruction.<sup>5</sup>

Specifically, if we examine the lives of two notables in our times, it is clear that the educational process that provided the world with Mother Theresa and the process that gave us Osama bin Laden consisted of the same elements: instruction, study, reflection, practice, assessment, and experience. Whether one becomes a person who values *service*, or one who values *power*, the process is identical. The developmental outcome is not explained by contrasting how one is raised, the difference is in what one learns. (Bergen, 2006; Stone, 1999) The process for developing competence and character is widely understood and implemented among nations and cultures. The differences that exist are in the content within the process. (Marrella, 2009)

In conclusion, regardless of the amount of information we may absorb in school, we must be able to make wise and informed decisions and demonstrate the ability, courage, and commitment to act accordingly. Children will never learn how to be people of character unless they learn about character. They cannot be ethical if they do not understand ethics. These matters must be embedded within every subject and school activity (academics, administration, the arts, and athletics). Without this foundation, we cannot expect our graduates to understand the intrinsic ethical issues within the politics, practices, and problems of our day. A failure to develop character in school is an ethical failure within the profession of education. "In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students' character, social-emotional skills, and academic competencies will define school excellence." (Bencivenga, Elias, 2003) Each year we honor the memory of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. His work helped to right grievous societal injustice. He understood, very early in life, "Intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character -- that is the true goal of education."  
<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/special/mlk/king/words/education.html>.)

We believe that competence and character can and must be developed simultaneously, across the curriculum. Such efforts will: *Provide Society with Trustworthy Citizens of Competence and Character*, our greatest gift. By integrating efforts to achieve these goals we avoid additional costs and realize the greatest benefits. On the other hand, the cost of ignoring character development in our schools is both palpable and incalculable. *Competence Without Character is Truly our Greatest Threat*

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Annual "Summer Leader Session," United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 10996, *Leadership & Ethics Seminar*, William E. Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic & Center for Leadership and Ethics, June 2007.

<sup>2</sup>Cheating in school continues to be rampant and it is getting worse. A substantial majority (64 percent) cheated on a test during the past year (38 percent did so two or more times), up from 60 percent and 35 percent, respectively, in 2006. There were no gender differences on the issue of cheating on exams. (*The Ethics of American Youth - 2008 summary*, Josephson Institute, <http://www.charactercounts.org>)

<sup>3</sup>This recalled to mind a story about Osama bin Laden who was alleged to be "...an honorable student...he never cheated..., but he didn't hide his paper if others wanted to look over his shoulder." (Cole, Steve, *Letter from Jedda, Young Osama*, The New Yorker, Dec 12, 2005)  
[http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/051212fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/051212fa_fact)

<sup>4</sup>This result is not unexpected. "Research studies conducted in different cultures around the world have substantiated the universality of core ethical values." (Character Education Partnership, 2008, p.2 <http://www.character.org>)

<sup>5</sup>For an in depth discussion of the practices within the *madrasas*, see Goldberg, Jeffrey, *Inside Jihad U*, "The Education of a Holy Warrior," New York Times Magazine, Jun 25, 2000.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20000625mag-taliban.html>)

<sup>6</sup>This theme is reflected in the writings of several noted theologians, philosophers and psychiatrists. See for example, Viktor E. Frankl, (2000), *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, New York, Basic Books, Persus Books Group

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This paper was originally submitted in partial fulfillment of curricular requirements in Ms Toso's PhD program, in Moral-Leadership, at Alvernia University, Reading Pennsylvania (2007). This collaborative effort was approved by the Professor Bongrae, Seok, PhD (Course PhD 711).

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**Developmental**  
(Learning)  
**Model**

**Instruction~Study~Reflection > Knowledge, Understanding**

**Practicum > Adherence, Discipline**

**Assessment > Belief, Confidence**

**Experience > Leadership, Wisdom**

*Center for Leadership & Ethics*