Character Education with Resident Assistants: A Model for Developing Character on College Campuses

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Tom Wolfe's 2004 novel, I Am Charlotte Simmons, paints a picture of American higher education that would make any parent hesitate before sending a child off to college. The protagonist, Charlotte Simmons, is a naïve freshman from rural Appalachia who is eager to explore the life of the mind at an elite university called Dupont. However, Charlotte quickly discovers that the life of the mind is elusive. Instead, she struggles amid her cynical peers who would rather pursue the life of the body by constantly binging on alcohol, sex, and more sex. At Dupont University, hedonism reigns supreme. Indeed, many of Wolfe's characters view college as a time to experiment without consequences. It is the Las Vegas of young adulthood—where what happens in college, stays in college. In short, Wolfe conveys that something tragic has happened to contemporary higher education in America, and that society is somehow the worse for it.

Character Education in Higher Education

Wolfe's tale is not new. In fact, students' misbehavior and other societal concerns have led some over time to admonish university administrators to improve higher education. John Henry Newman, for example, argued that the university ought to serve as a true Alma Mater, a bountiful mother who nurtures a "gentleman" by teaching students how to behave properly in society (Newman, 1852/1996). More recently, Derek Bok has called for universities to take the lead in tackling social ills by first building the character of their students (Bok, 1990). Both Newman and Bok are realistic enough to know that universities are not the panacea for all of society's problems. However,
their exhortations join a chorus of others who insist that institutions of higher education ought to be more concerned with the formation of character.

Character education is a complex, historical concept (e.g., see Laud, 1997; Leming, 1997; McClellan, 1999). Indeed, it is an educational endeavor that dates at least as far back as ancient Greece. America's earliest institutions of higher education were principally concerned with the formation of character, which largely occurred under religious auspices. For instance, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, among other early colonial universities, were initially founded as theological schools to train ministers. Throughout the 1800s, however, practices of character education declined in many colleges and universities as education shifted away from religious moorings. A number of character education initiatives reemerged in the twentieth century with a focus on civil virtues, values clarification, or moral reasoning. The work of Lawrence Kohlberg, which emphasized six stages in the development of moral reasoning, was particularly influential. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a new character education movement gained popularity. Educators associated with the movement tended to conceptualize character education as more than mere cognitive reasoning exercises. The character education movement emphasized the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of character development while encouraging students to know the good, love the good, and do the good (Lickona, 1996; Ryan and Bohlin, 1999).

Throughout the history of character education, a variety of individuals and groups have used multiple terms in disparate ways. Some terms associated with the concept include moral education, character development, ethical formation, religious training, values clarification, virtue education, and pro-social behavior promotion. For the purposes of this essay, I use character education to mean an intentional initiative that directly attempts to foster a caring environment where persons are taken seriously as responsible individuals, and where persons are challenged to explore and encouraged to apply essential ethical principles to their own lives and to their relationships with others. In
the pages to follow, I focus on the connection between character education and higher education. Indeed, higher education has a responsibility to both its historical beginnings, which assumed character formation, and to its future legacies, which are dependent upon how well character is transferred to later generations.

For the past eight years I have worked in residential life, which is a department within the division of student affairs, at a large, private university. In that time, I have observed various dimensions of student behavior and development. On one hand, I have supervised some of the best and brightest students who are able to role-model positive examples for their peers. On the other hand, I have adjudicated many disciplinary hearings where some students struggle to decipher right from wrong, much less take responsibility for their actions. While observing these extremes, and everything in between, I have become increasingly concerned about the character development of young adults and about a society that inherits graduated students. It is a gross exaggeration to suggest that all institutions of higher education promulgate an “Animal House” atmosphere. Indeed, the missions and practices of many colleges and universities offer respectable alternatives. However, I wonder if contemporary higher education could do more for students like Charlotte Simmons, whose potential to contribute to the betterment of society is currently unrealized. To this end, I believe that divisions of student affairs, which are intentionally structured to facilitate the holistic development of student life, can serve as effective catalysts for character education.

Divisions of student affairs are generally responsible for a wide variety of programs, policies, and resources that profoundly shape students’ college experiences. For example, student affairs often encompass residential life, judicial affairs, student activities, religious life, career services, academic advising, community services, and multicultural affairs, to name a few. As a result, student affairs is uniquely positioned to assist with any endeavor in character education. In the following pages, I discuss a model for character education that can be implemented or adapted to a variety of settings.
within higher education. In particular, the model focuses on the formation of character in resident assistants, vital human resources in student affairs who benefit from character education and who, in turn, foster character development in their fellow students.

**A Model for Implementing Character Education on College Campuses**

Based largely on the principles of the contemporary character education movement, Character Education with Resident Assistants (CERA) targets an influential population of student leaders on college campuses—resident assistants. CERA intends to develop the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of character through monthly training sessions that help resident assistants to know the good, love the good, and do the good. It is built upon the transforming literary power of biographical writings that depict exemplars who model virtue. CERA entails a threefold method of implementation: exposure, exploration, and application. Resident assistants’ direct supervisors facilitate training sessions that expose resident assistants to role models, that explore the virtuous actions of these role models, and that encourage resident assistants to apply virtuous behavior to their own lives. Supervisors employ “the critical incident technique” (Flanagan, 1954) to measure the program’s effectiveness. In the end, CERA will hopefully inspire character not only in resident assistants, but also in fellow students on college campuses with whom resident assistants regularly interact. It is important to note that models are best used for inspiration, not imitation. CERA can be replicated as an education plan, but it is meant to inspire further ideas that can be adapted for use on several college campuses.

**Characteristics of Participants**

Generally, resident assistants are upperclassmen responsible for maintaining campus residence halls, enforcing residential policies, performing administrative tasks, developing community, and assisting students. As a result, resident assistants are student leaders within
divisions of student affairs who are often viewed as role models by fellow students in the residence halls where they live and work. They are therefore a potentially rich target population for a character education exercise. Moreover, resident assistants function as both students and teachers of character education. On one hand, resident assistants are recipients: through CERA, they learn about admirable virtues, pursue these virtues, and then exhibit these virtues in their daily behavior. On the other hand, resident assistants are purveyors of character education. They interact daily with fellow students. In doing so, resident assistants have several opportunities to transfer, both formally and informally, the lessons they are learning from CERA to other students around them.

**INTENDED OUTCOMES AND CONTENT OF CERA**

There are four intended outcomes of CERA. First, CERA attempts to advance a school’s preexisting mission by building character education upon the unique identity of a college or university in which CERA is set. As Lerner (2005) suggests, a crucial first step to the practice of character education is to ask: “What does it mean to have graduated from this school?” Indeed, one can avoid an arbitrary or subjective implementation by simply advancing missions, visions, or goals that are already in place at a college or university. Factors pertaining to the unique culture or identity of a particular school can be uncovered in the various traditions, rituals, artifacts, stories, and myths that are found within a school.

As one example, and for the purposes of this essay, CERA is adapted to a private, coeducational, and nonsectarian university pseudonymously referred to as New Athens University. New Athens University houses over 11,000 resident students in a variety of residence halls on an urban campus. The university’s established motto of “Learning, Virtue, and Piety” is foundational to the mission of CERA. This motto suggests, among other things, that New Athens is committed to both intellectual formation and character formation. On some level, it is expected that graduates from the university ought
to exhibit an informed foundation of learning, virtue, and piety. Thus, resident assistants trained in character education will serve as catalysts for advancing the university’s motto.

In addition, CERA is based on the formal goals of the Office of Residence Life, the office within the Division of Student Affairs that employs resident assistants at New Athens University. One goal of the Office of Residence Life is to create an environment where civility and respect for others are the norms for community living on campus. CERA intends to provide an educational atmosphere where resident assistants can exemplify virtues of civility and respect in their own lives while simultaneously inspiring fellow students to do the same.

The second intended outcome of CERA is to highlight virtues that are particularly relevant to the unique culture of New Athens University. The aforementioned virtues of civility and respect are vital to students’ healthy development both in and beyond college. Indeed, if students are to graduate and enter the broader society, then they need to show civility and respect by exhibiting proper social behavior in their interactions with a diverse population of people. However, simple, anecdotal observations reveal that there is a need to embrace other timely virtues such as responsibility, self-discipline, and honesty. These virtues appear to be relevant to the lives of college students in general, and at New Athens University in particular. Many college students at New Athens are stumbling upon a wealth of freedom and independence for the first time; yet, the flip side to freedom is responsibility for one’s actions. Self-discipline is also an important virtue because some college students at New Athens make hasty decisions that sometimes result in unintended, and occasionally disastrous, consequences. Finally, honesty is emphasized because some New Athens students appear to be struggling with plagiarism, lying, and cheating.

Third, CERA intends to develop the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of character, an incorporation of the fundamental psychology of the current character education movement. It aims to help resident assistants “know the good” by increasing their understanding of particular virtues that are relevant to their school culture.
and that are necessary for a good society. Virtues such as responsibility will be studied, discussed, and debated. CERA also provides an environment where resident assistants “love the good.” It is hoped that resident assistants will continue to pursue honesty without a great deal of effort, because the practice of such a virtue increasingly compels them to do so; however, CERA will also provide support and encouragement as resident assistants develop the affective aspects of character. Perhaps most importantly, CERA encourages resident assistants to “do the good.” The overall thrust of the character education model is for resident assistants to apply character education lessons to their own lives and then act in a way that exemplifies good behavior for others.

As resident assistants develop cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of character, they also develop as role models to the students around them. Consequently, a fourth intended outcome of CERA is for character education to trickle down and spread to other students on campus. Resident assistants advance character education informally by exhibiting excellent behavior. Resident assistants also advance character education formally by organizing hall programs that are modeled after the lessons they receive in CERA. The result, ideally, is an overall edification of the campus ethos. Furthermore, graduates are empowered to better contribute to a good society once they leave New Athens University.

**Required Resources and Materials**

CERA requires two general resource areas to be most effective. First, CERA needs the support of human resources. Stakeholders within New Athens University in general, and within the Office of Residence Life in particular, need to bolster the goals and practices of CERA. Character education can be controversial. For instance, criticisms of indoctrination abound. These criticisms are partially due to initiatives that have a subjective tendency to isolate themselves from the support of others. In some instances, freelance character education can even counter the central mission of a school. Thus, it is all the more important to involve a
team of stakeholders, people who support the philosophy of character education and who have a vested interest in the success of specific initiatives advancing character education. When linked with valuable human resources within a school, character education can be both relevant and effective.

Second, CERA is built upon the transforming power of literature. Select books, particularly autobiographies and biographies, serve as exemplars for character, modeling virtues that resident assistants can adopt in their own lives. Literature is a profoundly formative tool. Great books can engage readers in ways that are more than meaningful; they can also be life-transforming. Biographies are particularly useful forms of literature for character formation because they highlight individuals who have already blazed trails that others can follow. These trailblazers serve as exemplars: they admirably model character amidst the strife and struggles of the real world. In doing so, they inspire virtuous practice in others.

Amid a sea of biographies, it is advisable to choose a biography that has particular relevance for one’s audience. For the purposes of CERA, two biographical writings are prominent because both have a formal connection to New Athens University in that the authors either attended or taught at New Athens. The first biographical writing is “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964/2000). This essay provides profound insight into issues of civility, respect, and responsibility. The second biographical writing is Elie Wiesel’s Night (1986), which explores relevant issues and virtues juxtaposed amid the atrocities of Auschwitz. Both biographical writings are read over the course of an academic year, one each semester. The following schedule of implementation provides more detail into how these biographical writings are incorporated into the character education plan.

**Schedule of Implementation**

Resident assistants at New Athens are required to attend weekly training and development meetings throughout the academic year. These
meetings provide training in skill sets that directly relate to job requirements. These meetings also provide training in areas that foster resident assistants’ holistic development as college students. CERA is incorporated into these regularly scheduled training and development sessions. In fact, one meeting per month is exclusively devoted to CERA for a total of four meetings per semester (eight meetings per academic year).

CERA entails a threefold method of implementation: expose, explore, and apply. The initial tactic for implementing CERA is exposure. Resident assistants are exposed to biographical materials that depict exemplars of character. Soon after resident assistants arrive in August, they are provided with a copy of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Resident assistants are asked to read the essay before their first CERA training session, which is scheduled later in September. Resident assistants are also asked to keep a journal of their impressions and reflections upon the essay.

During the first CERA session in September, resident assistants discuss their reflections on the essay. To assist with this reflection, Hall Directors, the direct supervisors responsible for the overall training and development of resident assistants, introduce a means of interpretation, which includes a focus on the dynamics of the author, the text, and the reader. Hall Directors deliver presentations on the historical context of the events surrounding King’s writing of the essay and resident assistants discuss the dynamics of the author and the text. They examine the genre, style, and tone of the document itself. Finally, resident assistants discuss the dynamics of the reader, which includes reflection on their own biases and presuppositions. Resident assistants are asked to note what the essay elicits from them as they read. The means of interpretation (author, text, and reader) are eventually brought together for a holistic reading of the essay. Discussion is facilitated around these interpretations.

The second regularly scheduled session for CERA is held in October. The purpose of this session is to implement the tactic of exploration. In particular, Hall Directors instruct resident assistants to
explore King's essay for specific virtues, such as responsibility, civility, and respect, among others. One helpful strategy for fostering exploration is to incorporate Aristotle's golden mean as a heuristic device (Kris, 2005). Aristotle places virtue at the center of a spectrum because virtue is a matter of the harmonistic balance of particular actions. On one extreme is a deficiency of this virtue, while on the other extreme is an excess of this virtue. For example, the virtue of courage might include the deficiency of cowardice and the excess of recklessness. Using Aristotle's golden mean as a heuristic device, resident assistants explore the range of virtues in King's essay. As a result, resident assistants develop a deeper understanding of the virtues at stake in King's essay. The exercise is a wonderful stepping stone to the third method.

The third method of implementation is a matter of application, which serves as the focus of the November session. With this session, CERA attempts to foster an environment where previous work on the understanding of particular virtues develops into action. To accomplish this, resident assistants engage in a variety of activities including writing activities and group activities. Resident assistants have been keeping a journal throughout the semester, which documents experiences they have had thus far. In light of this, resident assistants are asked to reflect upon their recorded experiences and to write a short essay on how they believe the virtues demonstrated in King's essay are applicable to their daily experiences as a resident assistant. In addition, resident assistants participate in a variety of group activities during this session. These group activities might include a role-playing activity where actors attempt to play out an interaction between a resident assistant and another student regarding respect for others in the residence hall. During the fourth and final session of the semester in December, the resident assistant staff actively participate in a community service activity within the university where they manifest their understanding of a particular virtue, such as responsibility, in a very concrete manner. The general thrust of the community service activity is to encourage the actual application of character both to individual lives and to the lives of others.
The above methods of exposition, exploration, and application are repeated again over the course of four monthly sessions during the spring semester. However, the spring semester focuses on Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a classic in Holocaust literature. They are challenged by an author that isolates and adopts character traits amid the most trying of human experiences. They are later encouraged to adopt their understanding of these virtues into their everyday behavior.

**Evaluation of Effectiveness**

CERA is evaluated twice during its implementation, once at the end of the fall semester and once at the end of the spring semester. The evaluation is modeled after "the critical incident technique" (Flanagan, 1954) and it takes the form of a questionnaire. Each resident assistant writes a critical incident, which is a factual report of an event that occurred as a direct result of what the participant learned in CERA (Fivars and Fitzpatrick, 2001). The report describes an event that was significant in the opinion of the participant, and thus could be considered "'critical' in determining whether the outcome was effective or ineffective" (Fivars and Fitzpatrick, 2001, p. 1). The questionnaire begins with a statement such as the following: "Think of a time when you were challenged to exhibit good character—the type of behavior that exemplifies a good role model." The questionnaire then includes follow-up questions. For example: What were the general circumstances leading up to this incident? What, specifically, did you do that was effective? Why was this effective? (The questions can also request examples of poor character, or general ineffectiveness.)

The questionnaire is then read and analyzed by a Hall Director who searches for and categorizes common themes. A second Hall Director reviews the selection of these themes. The final list of themes provides an indication of the effectiveness of CERA by showing whether desirable themes are evident in participant responses. The critical incident technique can also be administered to the secondary target population—students with whom resident assistants interact. For instance, a sample of these students can complete an adapted
questionnaire. Hall Directors can analyze responses and draw conclusions regarding CERA's effectiveness at transferring character lessons to the general student body. In the end, the critical incident technique is a simple, cost-effective means of evaluating CERA's ability to achieve the general aim of enabling both resident assistants and students to know the good, desire the good, and do the good.

CONCLUSION

Character education in higher education is a challenging enterprise. There are concerns regarding academic freedom, debates about the role of the university, and criticisms of purported indoctrination. Furthermore, character education initiatives in the past have often erred by neglecting what is known about individual human development, at one extreme, or by slipping into moral relativism, at the other extreme.

Nevertheless, character education in higher education can be a noble enterprise. Indeed, America's earliest colleges and universities were primarily concerned with the formation of character, an educational venture that dates back to ancient Greece. While studies of character development have shaped understandings of character formation over the past century, core philosophical understandings of character have retained a foundational influence. The use of character education in higher education is valued because it marks a return to the original principles of higher education's founding, yet it is a return that intends to avoid the elitist tendencies that too often excluded minorities from higher education in early America. CERA is a model that can be implemented or adapted to meet the unique needs of colleges and universities. In the end, CERA just might provide a firm foundation on which a student, such as the fictional Charlotte Simmons, can develop as an individual, grow in respect for others, and contribute to a better society.
References


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