

Character Development: Contributions from Undergraduate Activities and Interactions

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Abstract

This examination assessed the significant contributions of institutional activities and interactions regarding students' character development within a liberal arts institutional setting. Data elements from four classes of alumni participants were utilized and extracted from the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium's Alumni Surveys. The results of this exercise confirmed many established outcomes concerning student character development, in addition to substantiating assertions concerning which college relationships and experiences have the greatest impact in contributing to its enhancement.

Keywords: College students, Character development, Liberal arts

1. Introduction

The growth and development of students, including their character development, have been evaluated continuously throughout the existence of higher education. However, in recent years, institutions have had to respond more vigorously to assessment and accreditation standards and increased accountability demanded by critics and the public. This has led to increased scrutiny of student learning outcomes, resulting in a recent resurgence of interest in examining character-based attributes. As a significant trait in many college mission narratives, much of which has a historical origin from the denominational beliefs of religiously affiliated institutions, character has included elements concerning moral and ethical principles, spirituality, cultural and social norms, and empathy towards others. These elements are especially prevalent at liberal arts institutions, which emphasize student engagement in resources intended to facilitate character growth (Kuh, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Yanikowski, 2004).

Historically, character attributes were highly valued in higher education. However, over the

past few decades, there has been a decline in their prioritization. Institutions now focus more on students' professional and vocational development, rather than their moral and ethical values. This shift is due to significant demographic changes in accessing higher education and reforms in curricula. Unfortunately, this erosion of the holistic notion of education challenges the attitudinal tenets that enhance both intellectual and personal development (Astin, 1993; Astin & Antonio, 2004; Chickering, 2010).

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on character development, driven by concerns around campus climate (such as issues related to gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and politics) and challenges faced by various sectors of society (including corporate, environmental, financial, and political). These challenges encompass a range of issues, such as improving access to education, promoting equality, tackling healthcare-related problems, addressing immigration and international relations, and strengthening the economy. All of these issues are seen as matters of character and social responsibility (Chickering, 2010; Dalton & Crosby, 2011).

Research has shown that students who engage in activities related to leadership, community service, internships, and religion tend to experience significant personal development. Furthermore, interacting with peers from different racial/ethnic groups and faculty in both formal and informal settings has also been found to contribute to character development (Astin & Antonio, 2004; Thompson & Common, 2017; Thompson & Epstein, 2019). This study aims to add to existing research on student character development by examining the impact of effective educational practices and activities at a liberal arts institution. Given the institution's emphasis on personal attention and access to resources, it is expected that the results will reflect positive evidence of these attributes. The study will use alumni observations to better understand the effects of institutional resources on character development during undergraduate studies. As previous studies have shown, engaging with institutional resources significantly influences student learning and growth (Chickering, 2010; Holmes, 2020; Koch et al., 2020; Kuh, 1998; Parker et al., 2016).

The design of the present study was guided by a set of expectations:

- Interactions and experiences with faculty and classroom challenges would have strong bearings on the character development of alumni.
- Diversity-related interactions and experiences with peers from diverse races and ethnicities would have strong contributions to alumni character development.
- Participation in religious groups would contribute to alumni character development.
- Interactions with multicultural student groups would affect the character development of alumni.
- Community service and internship training would strongly influence character development.

2. Method

IWU alumni who graduated five- and ten-years out were selected for this study because of their length of exposure to undergraduate opportunities (*i.e.*, four years or more), including their post-undergraduate perspective concerning the perceived quality of their undergraduate experience.

Via electronic mail invitation, 3,389 alumni were asked to complete a web-based survey. The instrument was administered in the spring semesters of 2018 and 2020 over a period of approximately 30 days. Three reminders were sent to the alumni. The alumni solicited for this study were from the Classes of 2007, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2016.

Seven hundred and sixty-four alumni participated, establishing the response rate at 23%. The male population was doubled via weighting procedures, which used the frequency variables (*e.g.*, men = 2) as case weights. This procedure has been noted as an effective tool in eliminating the influence of differential response rates (Dey, 1997). The analyses were based on the responses of 762 participants who provided full information on all variables. Approximately 12% of the participants were alumni of color, 3% international, 78% white, and 7% unknown—relatively consistent with the overall institutional percentage for each group. Fifty-three percent of the participants were women, while 47% of the participants were men. The 2018 and 2020 Alumni Surveys were administered through the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS).

The present study utilized a composite variable to represent character development, which included seven items related to the knowledge, skills, and preparation alumni reported in areas concerning family, social justice, civic engagement, and ethical reasoning. The selected items were taken from the HEDS Alumni Survey and were largely based on measures derived and validated through exploratory factor analyses in Astin and Antonio's (2004) study regarding the impact of college on character development. In addition, similar measures were successfully implemented in past studies of character development that examined the role and effectiveness of the liberal arts environment in contributing to the enhancement of character (Thompson & Epstein, 2019). These measures examined character as a conglomeration of attitudes, beliefs, morals, values, and behaviors highly favored in society. An overall average of the character items yielded an alpha of .83. Based on a 4-point scale (4 = Very Much to 1 = Very Little) the mean score for the character variable was 2.72, with a standard deviation of .71.

Based on responses to the character variable, three groups were created indicating the degree of character development (high, medium, low). The following is a description of the three groups:

- High Character Development: A total of 231 respondents (30%): Greater than 3.00.
- Medium Character Development: A total of 251 respondents (33%): Greater than 2.43 and less than 3.00.
- Low Character Development: A total of 282 respondents (37%): Less than 2.43.

Identified from previous studies, nine categories based on students' interactions, experiences, and activities were identified in the alumni survey instruments (Kuh, 1998; Thompson & Common, 2017; Thompson & Epstein, 2013, 2019). Student-faculty interaction was examined through a 9-item scale with an alpha of .92. Faculty and class expectations and challenges were examined through 5- and 9-item scales with alphas of .85 and .83, respectively. Diversity-related interactions with peers and activities were assessed via a 6-item scale. The alpha for the scale was .87. Five individual items accounted for activities concerning community service, religious groups, internships, service organizations, and multicultural student groups.

In addition, a 2-item scale was used to examine differences in the overall satisfaction of alumni as related to character development ($\alpha = .76$). It would be expected that alumni reporting greater character development over their undergraduate experience would, in turn, find higher levels of connectedness and satisfaction with their alma mater.

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedures were used to assess the extent to which there were differences in the contribution levels of institutional activities and interactions between the three character development groups described above (Stevens, 1996). The independent variables in the MANOVA design were the character level group (low, medium, high), gender, and race/ethnicity. The dependent variables were the categories of nine institutional activities and interactions and overall satisfaction. Univariate effect sizes were calculated to determine the strength of significant character group differences when the multivariate F ratios were statistically significant.

3. Results

The F ratio for character development was statistically significant, $F = 26.12$; $df = 20, 1,348$, $p < .001$, as were the univariate F ratios for all nine of the institutional resource categories ($p < .05$ to $p < .001$), as well as the overall satisfaction item ($p < .001$). The means and standard deviations for the nine institutional resource categories between character development are presented in Table 1. Effect sizes for each significant univariate test are reported in Table 2.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the character level groups

Variables	Character Level Groups						Univariate <i>F</i> Ratio
	Low		Medium		High		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<i>Student-Faculty</i>							
Interaction	3.84	0.74	4.29	0.55	4.63	0.42	107.39***
<i>Faculty</i>							
Expectations	3.49	0.68	3.96	0.61	4.33	0.56	108.25***
<i>Class</i>							
Assignments	3.45	0.56	3.80	0.45	4.16	0.50	112.54***
<i>Diversity</i>							
Interactions	2.40	0.72	2.96	0.69	3.57	0.71	171.69***
Community Service	2.56	1.03	2.66	1.12	3.27	1.03	26.25***
Religious Groups	1.65	1.16	1.84	1.24	2.08	1.37	6.51**
Internships	2.50	1.38	2.73	1.42	2.88	1.42	3.76*
Service Organizations	2.37	1.27	2.51	1.26	3.15	1.32	22.75***
<i>Multicultural</i>							
Student Groups	1.82	1.12	1.88	1.07	2.46	1.31	23.57***
<i>University</i>							
Satisfaction	3.29	0.80	3.89	0.56	4.13	0.43	107.88***

Note. $df = (20, 1,348)$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Effect sizes for significant univariate tests

Comparison	Effect Size
<i>Student-Faculty Interaction</i>	
Low and Medium	0.67**
Low and High	1.30**
Medium and High	0.69**
<i>Faculty Expectations</i>	
Low and Medium	0.72**
Low and High	1.38**
Medium and High	0.69**
<i>Class Assignments</i>	
Low and Medium	0.72**
Low and High	1.39**
Medium and High	0.78**
<i>Diversity Interactions</i>	
Low and Medium	0.74**
Low and High	1.65**
Medium and High	0.90**
<i>Community Service</i>	
Low and High	0.71**
<i>Religious Groups</i>	
Low and High	0.31*
<i>Internships</i>	
Low and High	0.30*
<i>Service Organizations</i>	
Low and High	0.60**
Medium and High	0.53**
<i>Multicultural Student Groups</i>	
Low and High	0.52**
Medium and High	0.48**
<i>University Satisfaction</i>	
Low and Medium	0.90**
Low and High	1.34**
Medium and High	0.51**

Note. ** $p < .05$; * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

An effect size of .2 is often considered small, .5 moderate, and .8 large.

The F ratio for the interactive effect between character development and gender was statistically significant, $F = 1.64$; $df = 20, 1,348$, $p < .05$. “Diversity Interactions” was the lone category where differences were found between men and women over character development levels. The means, standard deviations, and effect sizes for the “Diversity Interactions” category by character development levels are presented in Table 3. The F ratio for the interactive effects between character development and race/ethnicity was also statistically significant, $F = 1.79$; $df = 90, 5,807$, $p < .001$. However, the post hoc tests and effect sizes attributed to the mean differences were trivial due to the very small population sizes within each character level category per race/ethnicity group. Hence, the exclusion of any related results.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and effect sizes for diversity interactions by character and gender

Variables	Men		Women		Effect Size
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Low Character	2.40	.78	2.40	.63	0
Medium Character	3.07	.67	2.88	.71	.28 (small)
High Character	3.83	.69	2.94	.85	1.15 (large)

Note. An effect size of .2 is often considered small, .5 moderate, and .8 large.

4. Discussion

The study found that all institutional activities and interactions had a significant impact on character development. This provides strong evidence that using institutional resources can positively affect a student’s intellectual and personal growth. These results are consistent with previous studies that found different patterns of learning and growth among students. However, activities related to character development such as community service, religious groups, internships, and multicultural groups had only a small to moderate effect on character development, with community service having a slightly larger impact on the five areas. This is consistent with previous studies, which have shown variability in the strength of the impact of these activities on character. As alumni participated in the study, it is possible that they may have a greater appreciation for the impact of undergraduate activities after some time has passed since graduation. Therefore, the results of this study may reflect this expectation.

Previous studies have shown that students benefit greatly from diversity-related interactions and experiences with their peers, which contributes to their overall character development. The value placed on these interactions is significant and further supports the positive impact of engaging with individuals who have different lifestyles, customs, political views, and intergroup relations. Out of the six questions in the “Diversity Interactions” variable, five of them involve active participation in discussions, which is a crucial aspect that sets it apart

from other studies that may not accurately measure the content of diversity-based variables.

It is worth noting that there were significant differences in the effect sizes of character development groups (low, medium, high) in the areas of “Diversity Interactions,” “Class Assignments,” “Faculty Expectations,” and “Student-Faculty Interaction.” These differences were hierarchical, with higher engagement leading to greater gains in character development. The same pattern was seen in “University Satisfaction,” where alumni reported feeling more connected and satisfied with the institution when they had a greater engagement with these key areas. While previous research on character development and student-faculty interaction has been mixed, this exercise showed a strong correlation between the two, as well as with faculty and class expectations. In hindsight, it seems that an appreciation for relationships, exchanges, and academic rigor is better understood through engagement and interaction. Overall, these results suggest that increased engagement, interaction, and emphasis on diversity, classroom, and faculty-related activities and resources have a significant impact on the development of character-based attributes as reported by alumni.

The development of character is influenced by both cognitive and moral factors. Higher education professionals in student affairs divisions who interact with students regularly, such as residence hall assistants and directors, counseling and advising center staff, multi-cultural student affairs personnel, and those who focus on religious and spiritual life issues, are crucial in creating an institutional environment that fosters character development. It is important to recognize and appreciate their role, as well as clarify their responsibilities in providing support and encouragement to students in this area.

Collaborating with faculty to understand their approach to teaching and curriculum can greatly benefit undergraduate students. It is important for faculty to communicate to students that practical wisdom is gained through exercising sound judgment in situations that require personal reflection, social engagement, and a willingness to step outside their comfort zone. To facilitate this concept, faculty should create better curricular and co-curricular experiences that allow students to acquire practical wisdom. This value should be affirmed through teaching, interactions with students, and by the institution as a whole. These situations not only help develop individual character, but also foster ethical awareness essential for a democratic society. Regardless of the subject, these are values that the entire faculty should uphold and encourage.

Although student affairs audiences have recognized the importance of establishing connections for many years, the study shows that the practices that would allow for these connections to be established throughout all areas of the campus have not yet been fully implemented in the institution being investigated. However, it is evident that for student character development to be affirmed on a larger inter-institutional scale, more research is needed on the practices that most effectively influence its growth, the conditions under which these practices occur, and the transferability of these practices to institutions with different structures and cultures.

5. Limitations

The institution utilized for the present study is a private baccalaureate liberal arts university located in the Midwestern United States and serves a diverse and predominantly residential student population. The applicability of the findings to other campus settings is unknown. The survey instruments employed were administered to alumni from the Classes of 2007, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2016, who graduated five- and ten-years out. The significance of the findings is best understood when comparing the results with published analyses of larger, survey data that address similar questions.

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Appendix A

Variables

Character Development (alpha = .83)

- Developed skills: Civic engagement
- Developed skills: Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Developed skills: Ethical reasoning
- Developed skills: Critical thinking
- Prepared for social and civic involvement
- Prepared for interpersonal relationships and family living
- Prepared for responsibilities of post-undergraduate life

Student-Faculty Interaction (alpha = .92)

- Faculty genuinely interested in students
- Faculty interested in helping students grow in more than just academics
- Faculty good at providing prompt and useful feedback
- Faculty willing to spend time outside of class to discuss issues of interest and importance to students
- Non-classroom interactions with faculty had positive influence on personal growth
- Non-classroom interactions with faculty had positive influence on intellectual growth
- Non-classroom interactions with faculty had positive influence on career goals
- Developed a close, personal relationship with at least one faculty member
- Satisfied with the opportunities to interact informally with faculty members

Faculty Expectations (alpha = .85)

- Faculty posed challenging ideas in class
- Faculty asked to apply course concept to actual problem or situation

- Faculty asked to point out any fallacies in ideas, principles, or points of view in course
- Faculty asked to argue for or against a point of view
- Faculty challenged my ideas in class

Class Assignments (alpha = .83)

- Students challenged each others' ideas in class
- Wrote essays
- Completed assignments or projects in which I solved problems
- Made oral presentations
- Used course content to address a problem not presented in course
- Compared or contrasted topics or ideas from a course
- Pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of an argument/point of view
- Argued for or against a particular point of view and defended my argument
- Connected what I learned in multiple courses

Diversity Interactions (alpha = .87)

- Attended a debate or lecture on a current political/social issue
- Participated in a diversity or cultural awareness workshop
- Had discussions about intergroup relations with students differing from you
- Had serious discussions with other students about different lifestyles or customs
- Had serious discussions with faculty or staff whose political, social, or religious opinions were different from your own
- Had serious discussions with students whose political, social, or religious opinions were different from your own

University Activities Related to Character Development

- Frequency of participation in community service
- Frequency of participation in religious groups
- Frequency of participation in internships (paid or unpaid)
- Frequency of participation in service organizations (on or off campus)
- Frequency of participation in multicultural student groups

University Satisfaction (alpha = .77)

- Connection to undergraduate institution
- Satisfaction with undergraduate education

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Data Sharing Statement

No additional data are available.

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