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COMMENTARY

Colleges Should Teach Intellectual Virtues



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe |

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Look at what colleges state as their aims, and you'll find a predictable list: Teach students how to think critically and analytically; teach them how to write and calculate; teach them the skills of their discipline. As important as such goals are, another fundamental goal is largely being neglected—developing the

intellectual virtues they need to be good students, and good citizens.

Some academics may cringe at being charged with the task of developing virtue, believing that it's a job for others—especially when there is so little agreement about what "virtue" even means in a pluralistic society like ours. They are mistaken. In fact, we often encourage such development—if a bit unreflectively. We would do much better to take the time to think through what the central intellectual virtues are, why they are so important, and how they should be integrated into our curricula:

The love of truth. Young people need to love the truth to be good students. Without it, they will only get things right because we punish them for getting them wrong. When a significant minority of Americans reject evolution and global warming out of hand, the desire to find the truth rather than "truthiness" cannot be taken for granted.

Honesty. Students need to be honest because it enables them to face the limits of what they themselves know, encourages them to confront their mistakes, and helps them acknowledge uncongenial truths about the world. Most colleges encourage a kind of honesty: Don't plagiarize and don't cheat. But it is uncommon to hear them tell students, "Face up to your ignorance and error" or, "Accept this unpleasant truth and see how you can mitigate its effects instead of denying it."

Courage. Students need courage to stand up for what they believe is true, sometimes in the face of mass disagreement from others, including people in authority, like their professors.

Fairness. Students also need to be fair-minded in evaluating the arguments of others. They need the humility to face up to their own limitations and mistakes. They need perseverance, since little that is worth knowing comes easily. They need to be good listeners because

students can't learn from others, or from us, without it. And they need to be able to take the perspective of others, and empathize, especially in an age in which almost all serious published work is collaborative.

Wisdom. Most important, students need what Aristotle called practical wisdom. Wisdom is what enables us to find the balance between timidity and recklessness, between carelessness and obsessiveness, between flightiness and stubbornness, between speaking up and listening up, between trust and skepticism, between empathy and detachment. And wisdom is also what enables us to make difficult decisions among intellectual virtues that may conflict. Being fair and open-minded often rubs up against fidelity to the truth.

So how do we develop the intellectual virtues in our students? Few colleges think systematically about it. Aristotle rightly argued that character and wisdom are developed through practice and by watching those who have already mastered the relevant virtues. Some teachers have structured educational experiences to do exactly that.

Take the approach to education in the Knowledge Is Power Program charter schools that teach thousands of elementary-school children in dozens of poor, inner-city neighborhoods. KIPP has found that developing academic skills demands developing character. With virtues like perseverance and honesty and some of the other intellectual virtues we've described as essential parts of the curriculum, it's been possible for KIPP students to achieve high levels of proficiency in mathematics, English, and science. And these intellectual virtues aren't simply values that are preached. The teachers work hard, and consciously, at figuring out how to incorporate them in what they model in their everyday behavior. For example, in teaching first graders the importance of good listening, and how to listen well, KIPP teachers look intently at a student who is talking, and nod vigorously at what is being said.

At the other end of the academic continuum, the Harvard Medical School doctors Barbara Ogur and David Hirsch redesigned their third-year program at a community hospital in Cambridge, Mass., in order to better develop character. Combating the common erosion of empathy among medical students was one concern; teaching judgment another. Instead of changing course material, they changed the way students, teachers, and patients interacted. Instead of relying on rushed, impersonal encounters in frenetic hospital wards, each student was assigned to work in clinics every morning in close relationships with their doctor-mentors, and each student was assigned 15 patients to work with for the whole year. The aim was to structure learning experiences that simultaneously taught technical skills and encouraged the development of empathy, humility, courage, perseverance, perceptiveness, and reflectiveness.

The Cambridge and KIPP teachers programs do by design what some college professors also do, if often by accident. What questions we ask in class teach students how to ask questions. How we pursue the dialogue with them models reflectiveness. They watch whom we call on, or don't, and learn about fairness. We teach them when and how to interrupt—by when and how we interrupt. We teach them how to listen by how carefully we listen. If they see us

admitting that we don't know something, we encourage intellectual honesty as well as humility. We are always modeling. And the students are always watching. We need to do it better.

The mass-production approach to higher education that dominates at most institutions these days is much more focused on the "efficient" transmission of knowledge than it is on the nurturing of intellectual virtue. And when students notice the neglect of intellectual virtue in their own educational experience, they are likely to neglect it themselves when they are leading their adult lives as teachers and professionals. Lecturing college students about intellectual virtues promises to be about as effective as lecturing M.B.A. students about business ethics.

Intellectual virtues are no substitute for disciplinary skills. We have to fill the empty vessel. No one will choose a cardiologist who is brimming with love of truth, honesty, and perseverance but empty of anatomy and physiology. But it takes intellectual virtues to fill that vessel.

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