

# Student Character Development: Relationships, Resources, and Considerations

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**Abstract** This case study examination assessed the significant contributions of college resources regarding students' character development within a liberal arts institutional setting. The effects of attributed contributions from various interactions and experiences are analyzed within the context of Astin's [1] input-environment-outcome model. Data elements from student participants in their senior undergraduate year were utilized and extracted from merged longitudinal databases that included matching student responses from Student Information Forms (SIF) and College Senior Surveys (CSS), both instruments from the Higher Education Research Institute. The results of this case study confirmed many established results concerning student character development, yet also continue to raise questions regarding which institutional relationships and experiences have the greatest impact in contributing to its enhancement.

**Keywords** College Students, Character Development, Liberal Arts

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## 1. Introduction and Literature Review

Character development of students has been noted as an important outcome in higher education since its existence. Its high regard as an essential attribute of student development and growth is evident in its proliferation within college mission and vision materials historically and today. This is especially true at institutions emphasizing a liberal arts foundation, which promotes and facilitates the delivery of means in which character is defined, that is, resources that include an appreciation for cultural and social norms, empathy, spirituality, and moral and ethical principles [3,9,14,22,30].

Over the past several decades, interest concerning character development diminished in favor of institutional priorities that focused on the professional preparation of students and less on cognitive, ethical, and moral development [1,2,4,5,23]. Recently, however, character development as a learning outcome has received renewed interest as a significant aspect of students' holistic educational experience. This has been attributed to campus climate issues (e.g., gender and sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, political leanings), as well as indignations within the corporate, environmental, financial, and political

sectors of society, which have been identified as matters of character and social responsibility. These societal challenges include addressing access to education, health care-related issues, immigration, international relations, and the economy [4,6,20].

There have been a number of studies examining the promotion and enhancement of student character development and its contributing curricular and co-curricular areas. Much of the evidence significantly related to character development points to students' engagement with peers from different racial/ethnic groups, participation in courses on cultural and gender differences, participating in community service, leadership training, internships, attending religious services, and interactions with faculty [11,14,16,17,21,24]. Similar results were reported in Astin and Antonio's [2] investigation regarding the impact of college on character, of which the present study is loosely based. Six measures were chosen to address student character development: civic and social values, cultural awareness, volunteerism, importance of family, religious beliefs and convictions, and understanding of others. Within these measures, Astin and Antonio's results established that engagement with specific co-curricular and coursework activities, interactions, and experiences made significant contributions to students' character.

The present study will contribute to the above research on student character development by examining attributed contributions from various institutional resources within the context of Astin's [1] input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model. Astin's I-E-O model was utilized for this examination because of its proven usefulness in observing

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student learning and growth (outcomes) as a result of students' entering characteristics (inputs) and their exposure to institutional resources (environment). Students' predisposition to character building activities and attributes, as well as the attributed contributions from various institutional resources will be examined in relation to differences in character development gains as an undergraduate. As noted in previous studies, engagement with institutional resources (e.g., co-curricular and coursework activities, interactions and experiences) has a significant influence on the differential patterns of student learning and growth [1,12,15,22].

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants and Procedure

This study was based on a sample of seniors at a private liberal arts institution located in the Midwest United States with an approximate enrollment of 1,700 students. Data elements from 389 student participants in their fourth undergraduate year were utilized for the present study. Two senior classes were included in the analysis, representing 43% and 30% of their respective classes. 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 [7]. All subsequent analyses were based on a weighted number of 512 participants (females = 50%; males = 50%), who provided full information on all variables. Approximately 23% of the participants were Students of Color and 77% White – a minor overrepresentation of students for the institution's senior classes (73% and 75%, respectively).

### 2.2. Instruments

The data elements utilized for the present study were extracted from merged longitudinal databases that included matching student responses from the 2010 and 2013 Student Information Forms (SIF) and the 2014 and 2017 College Senior Surveys (CSS). The SIFs were administered during the student orientation programs of the students' first year, while the CSS instruments were administered in the final semester of the students' senior year. All surveys were administered through the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California - Los Angeles.

### 2.3. Variables and Design

The present study utilized a composite variable to represent character (dependent variable), which included eight items related to students' development, engagement, and the importance they placed in areas concerning family, social justice, civic engagement, and religion. The selected items were taken from the CSS and were largely based on measures derived and validated through exploratory factor analyses in Astin and Antonio's [2] study regarding the

impact of college on character development. In addition, these measures were successfully implemented in similar studies of character development that examined the role and effectiveness of the liberal arts environment in contributing to the enhancement of character [28,29]. These measures examined character as a conglomeration of attitudes, beliefs, morals, values, and behaviors highly favored in society. A summation of the character items yielded an alpha of .73, with a mean score of 21 (out of 32) and a standard deviation of 4.6.

Identified from previous studies, nine resources (independent variables) based on students' interactions, experiences and activities were identified in the CSS instruments [2,14,28,29]. Student-faculty interaction was examined through an 6-item scale, while interaction with peers from a racial/ethnic group different from their own was assessed via a 9-item scale. The alphas for the scales were .81 and .86, respectively. Seven individual items accounted for attending ethnic and women's studies courses and workshops, religious services, leadership training, internships, and community service. An eight-item composite variable (alpha = .76) was utilized to control for students' pre-college engagement in activities and their predisposition (e.g., goals, future plans) concerning objectives related to character development (e.g., family, social values, civic engagement). The design of the present study was guided by a set of expectations:

- Students' predisposition to character development (input) would greatly affect developmental outcomes.
- Interactions and experiences with faculty and peers from diverse races and ethnicities would have strong bearings on students' character development.
- Participation in religious services would contribute to students' character development.
- Ethnic- and gender-related coursework and workshop activities would affect students' character development.
- Community service, internships, and leadership training would strongly influence character development.

## 3. Results

Linear regression procedures were used to assess the contributions from various institutional resources to students' character development, while controlling for students' predisposition to character building activities and attributes, as well as gender and race/ethnicity. The results of the regression indicated that four of the 12 predictors explained 32% of the variance ( $R^2 = .32$ ,  $F(12, 285) = 10.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Students' predisposition to character development ( $B = 0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ), interactions with peers from a racial/ethnic group different from their own ( $B = 0.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), attending ethnic studies courses ( $B = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and participating in internships ( $B = 0.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ) significantly predicted student character development. Student-faculty interactions and engagement with community service, women's studies

courses, cultural awareness workshops, leadership training, and attending religious services yielded non-significant results, as did gender and race/ethnicity. Thus, the regression equation for the present study is as follows: Level of

character development  $(-.128) = \text{Predisposition } (.283) + \text{Diverse Interaction with Peers } (.266) + \text{Ethnic Studies } (.083) + \text{Internships } (.079)$ .

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations and Pearson Correlations of Predictors

|                        | Mean  | SD   | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5       | 6       | 7      | 8       | 9      | 10     |
|------------------------|-------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|--------|---------|--------|--------|
| 1) Character.          | 21.11 | 4.56 |        |        |        |        |         |         |        |         |        |        |
| 2) Predisposition      | 20.08 | 4.39 | .410*  |        |        |        |         |         |        |         |        |        |
| 3) Student-Fac Inter   | 14.46 | 2.70 | .105*  | .079   |        |        |         |         |        |         |        |        |
| 4) Diverse Peer Inter  | 27.06 | 6.75 | .386** | .232** | .234** |        |         |         |        |         |        |        |
| 5) Ethnic Studies      | 1.25  | 0.43 | .224** | .107   | .020   | .245** |         |         |        |         |        |        |
| 6) Women's Studies     | 1.18  | 0.38 | .092   | .085   | .105*  | .182** | .245**  |         |        |         |        |        |
| 7) Cultural Awareness  | 1.70  | 0.46 | .144** | .169** | .078   | .154** | -.009   | .041    |        |         |        |        |
| 8) Internships         | 1.54  | 0.50 | .230** | .068   | .145** | .196** | .104*   | .095    | .060   |         |        |        |
| 9) Leadership Training | 1.73  | 0.44 | .136** | .152** | .138** | .139** | -.235** | -.049   | .381** | .043    |        |        |
| 10) Community Service  | 1.96  | 0.62 | .015   | .165** | -.087  | .052   | -.131** | -.050   | .206** | -.131** | .311** |        |
| 11) Religious Service  | 2.01  | 0.74 | .079   | .168** | -.061  | -.139* | -.236** | -.131** | .132** | -.092   | .270** | .139** |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Student Character Development Coefficients

|                       | B     | SE B | $\beta$ |
|-----------------------|-------|------|---------|
| Gender                | -.041 | .064 | -.036   |
| Race/Ethnicity        | .047  | .028 | .088    |
| Predisposition        | .283  | .048 | .313*** |
| Student-Faculty Inter | -.062 | .041 | -.077   |
| Diverse Peer Inter    | .266  | .050 | .297*** |
| Ethnic Studies        | .083  | .032 | .147*   |
| Women's Studies       | -.047 | .034 | -.076   |
| Cultural Awareness    | .001  | .031 | .002    |
| Internships           | .079  | .030 | .139**  |
| Leadership Training   | -.088 | .035 | -.014   |
| Community Service     | .028  | .031 | .049    |
| Religious Service     | .056  | .032 | .098    |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## 4. Discussion & Conclusions

This study is the third of its kind [28,29] to address factors involving student character development at a highly selective small liberal arts residential institution. Its findings both confirm and are at variance with its predecessors in important ways. All three studies, for example, demonstrate the importance of character as a pre-dispositional attribute that can be tied to further character growth and development. The three studies also reiterate the importance of diverse peer interaction as an important factor, while they fail to chronicle the importance of women's studies courses or leadership training in enhancing character development and do not view gender or race as significant factors. The results of this study deviate from its predecessors in that religious service attendance no longer correlates with character development, while participation in an ethnic studies course,

for the first time, is a behavior that does invite a positive correlation. Other factors produced more mixed results. Although student-faculty interaction showed a modest correlation to character development in the first study, this study reiterated the results of its most recent predecessor in failing to locate such a relationship; attending cultural awareness workshops produced positive results in the first study, but the results failed to be reduplicated in the latter two. Similarly, the internship and community service participation factors produced mixed results among the three studies as a whole, demonstrating positive and negative correlations respectively in this particular study.

To a degree, such instability should be expected given the intrinsically dynamic nature of character growth and development and in some ways its presence enriches the authenticity of the findings. Nonetheless, the variations present in the results of this study when compared with its predecessors raise a number of interesting questions regarding the impact of institutional policies on the enhancement of student character development. While it is clear that students with a predisposition to facilitate their own character growth and development are more likely to be successful in doing so during their college years, and that this desire is more likely to be realized when students engage in interaction with a diverse set of peers, it is less clear as to how such interaction is supported and facilitated. What has to happen for students to reach out to peers with backgrounds different from their own? What kinds of safe spaces need to be in place for such interactions to occur in ways that are frequent and meaningful? It is within this context that the insignificance of religious service attendance is noteworthy, in contrast not only to our previous studies and but to others in the field. Simply attending a religious service may not offer one expansive possibilities for interacting with peers from backgrounds different from one's own. Similarly, self-selection processes may mitigate against benefiting

from such interaction when taking particular coursework (e.g. women's studies courses), pursuing leadership training, or engaging in community service.

Not only does such engagement need to be intentional, it must be persistent as well. Simply residing at a residential liberal arts institution does not guarantee immunity from affiliating with cliques or creating silos that push against interacting with peers from different backgrounds [27]. Indeed, the pressures to avoid such interaction are intense and are evident in many aspects of student life. Increasingly specialized majors narrow potential diversity among cohorts as they rise through the curricular pyramid, sometimes forcing individuals to choose between investing time in network groupings they categorize as being primarily academic as opposed to social [19]. Foreclosure with regard to career aspiration which inevitably becomes tied to one's choice of major may result in narrowing of exposure to peers with different backgrounds. Co-curricular choices in areas including athletics and artistic performance similarly require time commitments that circumscribe one's options for expanding levels of engagement [10]. In addition, the pressures to seek part-time employment as a way of assisting with family financial responsibility create additional restrictions involving time commitments and opportunities to explore new interests with different peer cohorts [8]. Finally, one cannot discount the effects of social media usage in both isolating individuals from direct peer contact while encouraging their grouping into like-minded allies [26]. In some ways, the levels of atomization apparent on the campus mirror tendencies at play in society at large [25]. But their presence highlights the importance of digging deeper into the factors identified as encompassing student character development to look specifically at opportunities for enhancing levels and types of peer engagement. Discovering on a micro level how specific courses, leadership opportunities, internships, co-curricular workshop attendance, community building activities, and religious service attendance help or hinder in this goal is quite important and should be a goal for future research. This is particularly true given the fact that youth seem to be attracted to performative types of civic engagement, eschewing more conventional institutionally defined activities [13].

At the same time, the fact that student-faculty interaction failed to demonstrate a positive correlation with student character development should give pause for concerted reflection. The claim that faculty and staff are generically able to mentor students in ways that model positive character development attitudes and dispositions, positively contributing to their socialization [18], needs to be reconsidered given the evidence provided in this study and its most recent counterpart. The presumed effectiveness ascribed to social modeling of this type, as an unquestioned part of the student-faculty or student-staff relationship, can certainly be disputed, and it in no ways appears to substitute for the importance of peer engagement with those from diverse backgrounds. Whether faculty and staff in their

interactions with students, actively work to promote such peer interaction through their teaching, their advising, and through their individual or group associations with students is a concern that deserves further investigation. It is not surprising that the atomization that is increasingly characterizing social relationships of all types is apparent within the residential liberal arts environment. But its presence makes it all the more imperative for faculty and student affairs personnel to construct structured opportunities for students to realize their potential for character growth and development through enhanced peer interaction with fellow students from different backgrounds.

## 5. Limitations

The institution utilized for the present study is a private baccalaureate liberal arts institution located in the Midwestern United States and serves a diverse and predominately residential student population. The applicability of the findings to other campus settings is unknown. The survey instruments employed were administered to first-year undergraduates in 2010 and 2013 (SIF), and again in 2014 and 2017 (CSS) when the students were in their senior year of study. The significance of the findings is best understood when comparing the results with published analyses of larger, survey data that address similar questions.

These limitations, however, do not temper this study's and its predecessors' (see, for example, Thompson & Common, 2017; Thompson & Epstein, 2013) contributions concerning the significant relationship between student engagement and the development of character over the undergraduate experience. The totality of the evidence supports the important role institutions play in shaping the intellectual and personal development of their students. The findings demonstrate again the vital importance of students' engagement with college-based interactions and resources and their impact on the holistic education of students.

## Appendix A: Content of Multiple Item Scales

### Student Information Form (SIF)

#### *Predisposition to Character*

- 1) Influencing social values
- 2) Raising a family
- 3) Helping others who are in difficulty
- 4) Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment
- 5) Developing a meaningful philosophy of life
- 6) Participating in a community action program
- 7) Helping to promote racial understanding
- 8) Improving my understanding of other countries and cultures

**College Senior Survey (CSS)***Character*

- 1) Influencing social values
- 2) Raising a family
- 3) Helping others who are in difficulty
- 4) Developing a meaningful philosophy of life
- 5) Participating in a community action program
- 6) Helping to promote racial understanding
- 7) Integrating spirituality into my life
- 8) Improving my understanding of other countries and cultures

*Student-Faculty Interaction*

- 1) Advice and guidance about your educational program
- 2) Emotional support and encouragement
- 3) Help to improve your study skills
- 4) Feedback about your academic work (outside of grades)
- 5) An opportunity to discuss coursework outside of class
- 6) An opportunity to apply classroom learning to "real-life" issues

*Diverse Peer Interaction*

- 1) Dined or shared a meal
- 2) Felt insulted or threatened because of your race/ethnicity
- 3) Had guarded interactions
- 4) Had intellectual discussions outside of class
- 5) Had meaningful and honest discussions about racial/ethnic relations outside of class
- 6) Had tense, somewhat hostile interactions
- 7) Shared personal feelings and problems
- 8) Socialized or partied
- 9) Studied or prepared for class

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