

# REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: ADULT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper outlines how I assessed and revised a proprietary character education program of study administered to non-traditional students attending an accelerated academic program at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. John Dewey's reflection practice doctrine provided the theoretical foundation and lens for conducting the analysis. Given the unique characteristics associated with non-traditional students, three main challenges are outlined: (1) students matriculate at varying levels of academic readiness and moral development, (2) there is low student engagement rate in character education, and (3) there is limited time for ethical instruction in a full academic curriculum and busy student lives. The reflection process included quantitative data from the Defining Issues Test-2 and qualitative data from observations, student and staff responses, and interviews. The presentation concludes with key takeaways and recommendations for future research.*

*Key Words: Adult students, character education, ethics, moral reasoning development, non-traditional students, university.*

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The efficacy of a character education program of study and the development of new strategies to increase ethical learning outcomes in non-traditional students is the focus of this reflective paper. Given the country's extreme polarization, institutions of higher education should expand students' perspectives, critical thinking skills, and capacity to reflect constructively, so that, upon graduation, students will be seasoned at refining and applying daily challenges to their perspectives, world views, sense of moral right and wrong, and ethical values.

Furthermore, the concept of phronesis indicates that virtue formation requires both instruction and repeated behaviors (Bergman, 2007). Students need an understanding of why they think what they think and then the time to reflect on their position. John Dewey's (1933) seminal work, *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*, laid the groundwork for reflection as part of the educational

process. Collectively, the goal of education and these experiences was to develop the individual's emotional, intellectual, and moral development (Dewey, 1944).

Rodgers (2002) outlined four criteria of Dewey's reflection process. Three criteria of primary relevance to the study site's character education program include the reflection process that occurs within a community and through interaction with others, the participants value the process of intellectual growth, and that the reflection process is systematic. Rodgers (2002) also outlined six phases in Dewey's reflection process stating,

1. An experience
2. Spontaneous interpretation of the experience
3. Naming the problems or the questions that arises out of the experience
4. Generating possible explanations for the problems or questions posed
5. Ramifying the explanations into full-blown hypotheses

## 6. Experimenting or testing the selected hypothesis (Rodgers, 2002, p. 851).

The criteria and phases listed above are foundational to the success of the study site's reflection process. The intended outcome of this process is to analyze and reflect on the current character education program at the study site and determine modifications necessary to increase students' moral development growth.

### STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The study site did not have a formal assessment program to measure the outcomes of its character education program of study. Therefore, I developed an experiment to collect quantitative data to measure moral growth development over the equivalent of one academic year. Students that volunteered for the study were given a pre- and post-test evaluation instrument (N = 84). In between the two testing periods, students attended a day-long boot camp upon matriculation. They received 27 credit hours of coursework infused with the character education program of study curriculum, with one of the three-hour courses a designated ethics class. After the results were analyzed, the character program failed to produce the outcomes expected by the study site. I led a team to analyze possible root causes and reflect on the overall process to increase the learning outcomes of the character education curriculum.

Few higher education institutions, outside of a small group of liberal arts institutions, include a comprehensive character and ethics program as part of their academic curriculum. Even fewer clearly outline character and ethics development as an educational goal in their mission statement and formally assess the ethical growth of their college students from matriculation to graduation (Yanikoski, 2004). One reason for this phenomenon may be related to students not viewing ethical growth and establishing a philosophy of life as a key outcome of higher education (Lickona, 2014). Universities and students are influenced by market forces, which results in a priority on degrees and curriculum that increase the students' marketability, economic value, and the acquisition of specific job skills (Floyd et al., 2010). Additionally, the government has long promoted the need for universities to produce graduates in fields of national interest (Bennett, 2019). With academic curriculums full of program and course objectives designed to meet the workforce's needs, holistically approaching character and ethical education is often pushed to the background (Floyd et al., 2010). Whatever the reason, throughout the study I observed low levels of interest and engagement in character education by the student body, and no statistically significant moral growth based on pre- and post-test quantitative data. Table 1 contains the mean pre-test and post-test scores for students participating

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables (N = 84)

Dependent variable	Pre-test		Post-test		Post-test minus Pre-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
P	24.30	14.47	26.55	13.37	2.24	16.02
N2	21.17	13.82	22.87	12.70	1.70	11.56
PI	27.93	11.91	28.08	11.86	0.15	12.75
MN	39.19	11.50	37.84	12.42	-1.35	13.11

Note. Post-conventional scores = P and N2, Personal interest scores = PI, Maintaining norms scores = MN

Note. Reprinted from Character Education and Moral Judgment Development in Undergraduate Non-traditional Students (Beaumont, 2021).

Table 2. Results of Paired Samples t-tests

Dependent variable	t	df	p	Cohen's d
P	1.28	83	.203	0.16
N2	1.35	83	.181	0.13
PI	0.11	83	.912	0.01
MN	0.94	83	.348	-0.11

Note. Post-conventional scores = P and N2, Personal interest scores = PI, Maintaining norms scores = MN

Note. Reprinted from Character Education and Moral Judgment Development in Undergraduate Non-traditional Students (Beaumont, 2021).

in this study. The p values for all four tests found in Table 2 were larger than .05; therefore, as the data from my dissertation research, Character Education and Moral Judgment Development in Undergraduate Non-traditional Students, indicates in the following tables, I concluded no statistically significant difference existed between the pre-test and post-test scores (Beaumont, 2021).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The study site includes character development in the university's mission statement, possesses a comprehensive character development program of study, and has an organizational goal to grow students ethically. Seven traits form the basis for the study site's character education program: Integrity, Leader, Servant, Steward, Communicator, Dependable, and Agile. Character education is embedded across the academic curriculum and includes optional co-curricular activities outside of the classroom. The character program possesses seven defined program learning objectives (PLOs) completed throughout the academic degree program (Beaumont, 2021). Elements of the character program include a formal boot camp upon matriculation, a designated ethics course, instructor-facilitated discussions customized to the respective class, and co-curricular offerings. Course objectives are assessed by discussion questions located on the study site's learning management system (LMS); written assignments that require the learner to incorporate character traits and themes; and actionable assignments, such as the generosity initiative, which is discussed in detail below.

The character experience starts on the first day of enrollment with all new students attending a day-long character boot camp. The character boot camp is a six-hour presentation containing a mix of lecture and group activities. Typically, it is held in person, but due to COVID-19, it was moved to a virtual WebEx® setting in March of 2020. At the beginning of each boot camp, the instructor asks the students how many enrolled to develop new skills and knowledge, and typically all hands are raised. When the instructor asks how many enrolled to enhance their ethics and individual character, no hands go up. I found it interesting and perplexing to witness how little value incoming non-traditional

students placed on ethical development as part of their post-secondary education.

At the end of the character boot camp, a capstone activity occurred where students are provided a \$10 bill as part of an experiential initiative called the "generosity initiative." In the case of the generosity initiative, the instructor directed the students to give the money to an individual they encounter in their daily lives whom they felt could use the money, then the students would provide a brief synopsis of what happened via email to the Director of Institutional Culture and Ethics. Students were asked to respond within two weeks of receiving the money. The small number of students who sent in responses wrote of compelling positive experiences. Of the responses received, many students claimed it was the first time they ever donated money to another person or charity, and they now had a different view on donating. The concept of philanthropy is further explored with students in classroom discussions. There was no question this was a memorable moment for many students, but why so few engaged in the process was a mystery.

The purpose of the character education program of study is to offer an academic program full of crucible moments and utilize educational techniques resulting in cognitive disruption and an individual analyzing their current belief system. "Crucible moments" refers to intentionally introduced situational challenges in which students are guided to intellectually apprehend theoretical principles and industry best practices designed to sharpen their judgment and question their existing assumptions. Optimization includes weighing and measuring whether a rigid pursuit of organizational goals (e.g., profit, ROI), objectives, and adherence to a strategic approach or company rules or industry norms is prudent and ethically sound. These items are then measured against interpersonal and macro-environmental factors, such as the mental and physical health of the workforce, equity in treating and serving people fairly, and active discouragement of practices that enable disparate treatment of workers and customers based on their status or demographics (e.g., gender, race, age, ethnicity, and innate capabilities).

In their first academic term, students take a designated three-credit-hour ethics course to introduce them to the specific character traits

valued by the study site. The course is designed to instruct students on how they may apply these traits to their daily lives and how an individual's character informs decision-making and influences judgment. The survey instrument for my study was the Defining Issues Test 2 (DIT-2). Used since 1974 to measure moral development levels, the DIT has been utilized in over 400 published studies; its validity, confirmed over time, demonstrates a Cronbach alpha in the upper .70s (Rest et al., 1999; Rest & Thoma, 1985), and a reliability index of .8 (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003). "The DIT score is significantly changed by moral education and significantly predicts moral behavior" (Choi et al., 2020, p. 3). The initial quantitative survey using the DIT-2 was administered during the first week of this course. Students are then exposed to the core character education curriculum through another 24-credit-hours of coursework embedded into the overall academic curriculum. The post-test assessment was administered after the completion of the 27 credit hours. Like the generosity initiative, the response from the study body was limited with only 20% of students volunteering for the study (Beaumont, 2021).

The study site also offers optional co-curricular activities designed to enhance the core character education program of study. These include, but are not limited to, participating in lunches on how to live better, Bible study meetings, serving in the community, or authoring papers on ways to enhance the study site's character program. Students who participate in these additional optional activities are given a special designation called "Character with Distinction." Students earning this distinction go above and beyond what the character education program of study requires of them by engaging in additional activities that serve their community. The trend of low participation in the character education program was observed in this area as well, with only a handful of students taking advantage of this initiative.

I analyzed the difference between pre- and post-test scores from the DIT-2 using two-tailed t-tests in non-traditional students after the equivalent of one academic year of character training. For purposes of this paper, non-traditional students are defined as those who are 25 years or older, are married, are veterans, or a combination of these factors. I also collected other data points allowing for group

comparisons such as age, gender, military veteran status, cumulative GPA, and academic program of study (Table 3). I found no statistically significant difference in moral judgment levels between the pre- and post-test scores (Table 2). I then embarked upon the reflection process to examine possible root causes to gain a greater understanding of what is occurring in the character education program of study and the practical application of the lessons learned from the reflection process to enhance the efficacy of the program.

Table 3. Demographic and Academic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 84).

Characteristic	Category	n	Percent
Gender	Male	58	69.0
	Female	26	31.0
Age (Years)	21 to 30	47	56.0
	31 to 40	26	31.0
	41 to 50	10	11.9
	> 50	1	1.2
Veteran	No	47	56.0
	Yes	37	44.0
Academic Program	Aviation	34	40.5
	Information Technology	27	32.1
	Nursing	12	14.3
	Business	11	13.1
Cumulative GPA	2.1 to 3.0	13	15.5
	3.1 to 3.9	47	56.0
	4.0	24	28.6

Note. Reprinted from Character Education and Moral Judgment Development in Undergraduate Non-traditional Students (Beaumont, 2021).

## REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

The current character education program at the study site arose from regular meetings with employers called Program Advisory Committees (PAC). The representatives of companies hiring the school's graduates stated the importance of ethical employees, so the institution developed an experimental curriculum requiring a thorough assessment and a dynamic response to student learning outcomes in the areas of character and ethical development. My role as the chief investigator was to develop an experiment to determine if the character educational intervention was growing students ethically. After analyzing



the results, I was then charged to reflect on the results, hypothesize possible root causes, develop lessons learned from the process, and create action items to enhance the character program of study. As noted above, findings revealed the character education program of study failed to advance moral reasoning development.

The lack of moral development at the study site can be attributed to several factors. The first is that no standard method for character instruction exists in any academic curriculum (Avci, 2017). There is also minimal research examining moral development in this student population and in minority-serving institutions, which led to the study site developing an untested experimental character education program of study. Another challenge is non-traditional students present with a wide range of moral developmental levels upon matriculation due to differing life experiences (Beaumont, 2021). Non-traditional student populations also possess minimal free time as many are employed and have families (Chen, 2017). This results in a situation where students prioritize academic assignments and objectives focusing on skills and knowledge relating directly to their future career field. The father of adult education, Malcolm S. Knowles, developed an adult education framework in the 1960s (Mews, 2020). One of the principles of andragogy as described by Knowles (2011), outlines adult learners are primarily interested in topics that provide an immediate benefit to their current life and job. In general, the students at the study site show less interest and engagement in general education courses and the character education program component.

Several designations make this institution unique such as it is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), primarily serving non-traditional adult students; it has a high veteran population, many students hail from the lower socioeconomic levels; and all are enrolled full-time, taking three classes every eight weeks. There are few breaks in the academic calendar, and students graduate with an associate degree in 15 months and a bachelor's degree in 28 months. Based on my observations, these non-traditional students enter the institution with an existing life philosophy and established ethical values. Likewise, other researchers found similar sentiments in traditional students. Lickona (2014) examined the results of information

collected from first-year students attending the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Since 1970, the importance of developing a life philosophy in college has decreased sharply. It is possible these traditional students either felt higher education could not help them develop further in this regard or did not believe it was a valuable pursuit during their college years.

Differing perspectives exist regarding the rationale for and value of ethics and a philosophy of life as integral parts of a student's higher education. In universities and colleges that include character development in their purpose and curriculum, selecting an approach and appropriate application is an agreed-upon challenge. Despite Lickona's (2014) findings and what students claimed in the study site's character boot camp, an individual's life philosophy and worldview are influenced by higher education. However, educators at the study site have an ongoing question of whether or not ethical development will occur purposely. Without a formal framework or guidance, students may navigate environmental influences on their own. The desire of the institution is to steer ethical development in a positive direction, leading to increased prosocial behaviors valued by society with more advanced moral dilemma critical thinking skills. Students recognize the value of earning a degree and the knowledge and skills developed during college. However, based on the engagement level of non-traditional students with the character curriculum in the study by Beaumont (2021), ethical development was not viewed as a vital learning outcome. Hence, the challenge was to reflect and determine how to package character and ethics education as a value proposition on par with the other desired educational outcomes from the student's perspective. Once students recognize the value of character experiences and ethical concepts, engagement should increase along with moral reasoning levels after character education training.

Dewey (1944) pointed out in his work *Democracy and Education*, the importance of life-long learning, that each stage of life possesses development opportunities, and the role educational institutions play in this process. Relevant to this study and population, Schinkel and de Ruyter (2017) stated moral development could occur in adults. Also, the current literature calls for examining the impact of character education in various educational settings, student populations,

and those with different types of educational interventions (Medeiros et al., 2017; Thomas & Dunphy, 2017). The scarcity of literature and standardized practices for the instruction of ethics and character in adult learners and the wide range of development levels seen in non-traditional students upon matriculation allow for a wide-open arena of study and exploration.

Through discussions and observations, the educators at the study site identified a critical challenge: balancing the character workload, including specific character and ethics course level objectives (CLOs) and PLOs in an already packed academic curriculum. Including all current academic and character objectives in the courses presented a challenge for instructional designers, faculty, and students. In many cases, the composite load was overwhelming for faculty and students, and instructors inadvertently compartmentalized academic objectives from character objectives in classroom discussions and assignments. This created a situation where many felt the character education program was more of a “sidecar” rather than a vital educational outcome infused into the academic curriculum. Character and ethics must be effectively woven into the classroom discussion and all academic topics rather than taught as a separate curriculum or in designated classes. A careful blending of the core character and academic objectives will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall curriculum delivery.

In the same vein, another consideration is the amount of time available to non-traditional students and how to balance the workload of an accelerated academic program with other student priorities. Once again, Knowles (2011) provides valuable insight. Non-traditional adult students focus on topics providing an immediate benefit. Therefore, if ethics education is not viewed through this lens, it will be regulated to the backburner with technical and academic subjects receiving attention. Insufficient interest and engagement by the non-traditional students in the character program indicated another missing element of the existing program design. These challenges collectively pointed to the need to present the character and ethics curriculum as a value proposition to adults who do not recognize the need for additional instruction in personal ethics and character and in a manner that addressed the

unique traits and demands associated with non-traditional students.

Given that one of the university’s primary objectives was to develop memorable crucible moments, Dewey’s (1989) work regarding creating experiences with the environment and then reflecting on them was selected as the basis for this process. My desired outcome from the reflection process was to develop an engaging, pragmatic character program of study that assisted students, regardless of background, to grow in their worldview perspectives, moral reasoning, and critical thinking skills. Overall, the institution’s desired effect of the character program is to develop exemplary graduates with a superior character who contribute positively to society.

### EVALUATION OF REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

There is no universal standard for character and ethics education in higher education. Avci (2017) described the situation as “a global perspective to ethics education is still in a nascent stage” (p. 14). Moreover, most research on the efficacy of character education programs has occurred in traditional students. Chen (2017) stated that non-traditional students are often overlooked in higher education. Overall, there is an inadequate amount of literature on formal character and ethics programs of study in undergraduate, non-traditional students (Beaumont, 2021), a population representing a significant portion of all post-secondary students (EAB, 2019). Older students have far different experiences than their traditional-aged counterparts, and their life experiences influence their beginning moral and ethical development levels (Chen, 2017). This same sentiment is echoed by Place (2019), who found life experiences are one of the most important influences in the moral development of public relations professions. Therefore, research in traditional students cannot be generalized to non-traditional students. Thomas and Dunphy (2017) reinforced this concept, after researching non-traditional students; they stated that non-traditional students experience and respond differently to educational interventions than traditional students. Comer and Schwartz (2017) made the case that there is a need to understand further how ethics and moral educational interventions impact different student populations. The above

discussion contributes to the first challenge: the study site's student population is understudied and possesses distinctive characteristics requiring a unique character program of study, which is, in many ways, exploratory and unproven.

Another observation was the insufficient engagement in character education by non-traditional students. For the most part, these students enter college with a life philosophy and believe they already possess personal character and a solid moral judgment about what is right and wrong. Because of these beliefs, for some engaging in the character education process is seen as insinuating they do not already have character or are in some way deficient morally. Another reason is non-traditional students are selecting their post-secondary institution and academic program primarily based on economic goals. These students have a clear path of what they want to achieve from their educational experience. Based on the student participation rates seen in the study by Beaumont (2021), participation in the generosity initiative, and in attaining Character with Distinction, it appears that developing ethics and character are not generally seen as a value proposition worthy of the time investment.

Non-traditional students have far more priorities to balance with their academic studies than their traditional counterparts. Chen (2017) described non-traditional students as those over 25 years old, who are employed full-time, with dependents, or who delayed attending a post-secondary institution after high school. Given that the study site's academic program requires all students to enroll in three courses (nine credit hours) each academic term (eight weeks), the cumulative academic load is immense. Students then prioritize assignments, with some receiving more attention than others. Likewise, students at the study site weigh the time commitment of participating in co-curricular activities against their other obligations. Asking these students to take on activities beyond their academic coursework is difficult due to their already full academic and life schedules. Ultimately, I realized educational interventions designed to influence ethical growth must occur in the classroom, facilitated by robust student-faculty interaction. These interventions must be embedded within the academic curriculum, directly relate to a student's future career, and activities need to occur

when students have already committed their time to school-based activities.

The experience of realizing students failed to demonstrate moral growth led me to follow Dewey's (1933) phases of reflection. An interpretation of this experience resulted in a quest to identify the issue, or issues, causing the character education program of study to fail. I subsequently developed a theory based on the fact commuter students primarily engage with faculty. After an examination of the end-of-course surveys, and student comments on the character program, I developed a hypothesis that one reason for the failure was instructors were not adequately trained to deliver character and ethics. Nor were they adequately trained in andragogical techniques, which are appropriate for adult learners (Knowles, 2011). A continuum model was proposed by Ha'gg and Kurczewska (2019), which stated educators need to understand the adult learners' proficiency level, moving them from a place of high direction toward self-directed learning. The assistance offered by the instructor varies according to the skillset of the adult learner (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018). Therefore, I identified faculty training as a material weakness and proposed the creation of a robust faculty training program in the delivery of character and ethics.

Two additional hypotheses also arose from the examination of the failure to develop the non-traditional students. I hypothesized the lack of engagement with the character program of study by students was that they failed to see how it was relevant to their lives or their future careers. This is based on Knowles's (2011) andragogical theory and comments by students and faculty at the study site. My third hypothesis revolved around the numerous competing priorities of non-traditional students. The research has established adult students experience many non-educational issues (Chen, 2017; Thomas & Dunphy, 2017), and was reinforced based on student feedback at the study site. These hypotheses are in the process of testing by comparing previous moral development results with future results after the implementation of recommendations made from the reflective process.

#### *Wide Variety of Development Levels in Incoming Non-Traditional Students*

Non-traditional students at the study site vary in numerous demographic categories.



These include age, military service, family obligations, academic readiness, and overall life experiences. Because of these differences, upon matriculation, they enter the institution with differing academic and moral reasoning levels. To test moral development level, I utilized the DIT-2. The instrument measures three schemas, from the lowest level to the highest level, the Personal Interest (PI), Maintaining Norms (MN), and Post-Conventional (N2/P) (Rest, 1986). The lowest form of moral reasoning measured by the DIT-2, according to Rest et al. (1999), is the PI score. Students entering the university scored as low as 2, indicating they rarely used this level of moral judgment, to a high of 54, indicating high use. The MN schema, which is also the most common moral judgment level, ranged from a score of 10 to 66. The N2/P schema, the highest moral reasoning level, ranged from a score of 0 to 60 (Beaumont, 2021).

Moreover, in the classroom, some non-traditional students responded to pedagogical teaching techniques, while others need a more andragogical approach. Adult learners rely on their life experiences as a foundational resource for learning and are generally self-directed learners. Non-traditional students differ from traditional students in that they seek an immediate application to their knowledge (Knowles, 2011). For this population, a mix of pedagogical and andragogical techniques may produce the best educational outcomes rather than relying solely on one or the other (Crumly et al., 2014). Furthermore, character development programs require two-way communication between the student and teacher, and instructors must understand their role in the process (Lovat & Dally, 2018). The unique student characteristics at the study site place a burden on faculty and student affairs staff to balance the instructional techniques and activities to create maximum engagement and provide growth opportunities, regardless of a student's current academic and moral reasoning level.

#### *Lack of Interest in Character Development*

The lack of interest in engaging in character education on the part of students materialized in quantitative data and observations collected. Since the students' primary goal is to obtain employment in a new field or advance in their current field, the

reflection process led me and others at the study site to ponder on how to create a value proposition for the students. The basis for the proposition developed by personnel at the institution is that ethical corporate governance has never been more critical in addressing societal demands for corporate responsibility. Society demands that corporations exhibit social responsibility and believes organizations have an ethical obligation to do so (Finlay, 1990). With globalization, there has been a push for universal ethical norms. One of the most referenced ethical pillars is the Golden Rule; variations of this idea can be found among most religions, secular philosophies, and cultures. The Golden Rule is not the silver bullet of global ethics, but it does provide a basic framework for individuals (Burton & Goldsby, 2005). In addition to society's demanding social responsibility and ethical behavior from companies and individuals, adhering to principles and doing what is right directly correlates to managerial performance (Cavazotte et al., 2012). Employers attending the study site's regular PAC meetings reinforce the above concepts and rationales for how they hire new employees and promote current employees.

The students enrolled at the university are advancing their education as an economic value proposition, therefore we deduced that the most successful technique is to teach character and ethics as a commodity valued by companies and as an essential part of the corporate hiring and promotion process. To promote student application of their assigned studies and help them contextualize learning as if they were already on the job, several traditional learning modalities (e.g., case studies, discussion of contemporaneous readings about their chosen industry, and engagement with personal stories related to course materials from faculty and invited/recorded industry leaders and supervisors), are to be supplemented with scenario-focused mini-exercises through role-playing and electronic team-based scenarios. All learning modalities are designed to help students realize that balancing near and future objectives requires prudence founded on universal, industry-based, and personal values.

A specific training program for faculty will develop the knowledge and skills they need to disseminate the value of ethical development to students effectively. However, one of the more



impactful initiatives is employer visits to the classroom to address the need for employees with high ethics and character. We theorize when students hear hiring managers speak of the importance of character and ethics, their attention increases. The university has not yet studied the phenomena empirically, but it is a planned area for future research. However, based on student comments from previous employer visits, this approach is a promising method to increase engagement.

### *Limited Available Time in a Non-Traditional Students' Lives*

Most non-traditional students enroll with a myriad of items requiring their attention and time. These time commitments include but are not limited to, school, family, work, and other obligations. The academic commitment of the accelerated program at the study site is substantial, and non-traditional students struggle to meet the innumerable demands in their life. In the 1960s, McClusky (1963) developed the Theory of Margin. This theory is based on the need for individuals to adapt as they age to address the increased responsibilities in life. Since life is unpredictable, individuals need to utilize their energy and time wisely to meet their regular and unexpected obligations. Continuing in this vein, McClusky (1974) outlined the Power-Load-Margin theory, which states an individual has a finite amount of power to address the requirements in their life or the load (the load can be comprised of internal and external stressors such as family, career, goals, and expectations). When an individual has excess power compared to the load, they possess the margin to take on additional tasks. The greater the differential between the power and the load, the more margin is available. A primary discussion point arising from the reflection process was developing a curriculum and programs designed to fully utilize the non-traditional student's available margin.

### **DECISIONS**

Understanding how to best instruct non-traditional students in character and ethics training is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Non-traditional students represent a diverse population and matriculate into higher education institutions at different academic and moral reasoning levels. Table 4 outlines my decision diagram after assessing the experimental comprehensive

character education program of study at the site. The reflection process allowed me, in partnership with others at the institution, to effectively develop new approaches to grow non-traditional students' ethical and moral reasoning skills. While the character program is pursued on an accelerated time frame, this effort still contributes to the institution's mission investment to the holistic development of students.

One of the core character traits of the institution is efficiency. Faculty and staff assist students with time management skills, which is an essential skill in an accelerated degree program. The institution possesses a high-touch student support services division that monitors both grades and attendance weekly. A robust student services conduit also exists, allowing for early identification of student academic struggles. Another way the margin of time is increased for students is in both the curriculum and assignment design. The number of deliverables required of students in a specific timeframe must be manageable. Furthermore, the assignments must be concise, condensed, and practical, all concepts aligned with Knowles theory (2011). Developing assignments and curriculum to expand the available time margin is an iterative process based on feedback from instructors, students, and the reflective process.

I identified three primary challenges resulting in the formation of new knowledge in ethical development in non-traditional students. The purpose of outlining the assessment and reflection is to provide a basis for other researchers in the field to utilize when developing their programs in this understudied population of students.

### *Knowledge Gained from Assessing Academic Readiness and Moral Reasoning Levels*

The study site's mission statement specifically outlines the development of character as an educational outcome. The character program outcomes analyzed in a quantitative study using the DIT-2 failed to demonstrate statistically significant growth in moral reasoning levels after the equivalent of one academic year of character education training (Beaumont, 2021). I reflected on possible reasons for the absence of growth in the sample population. The granular data revealed there was a wide disparity in individual moral judgment levels, students' ages ranged from 21 to

Table 4. Decision Summary

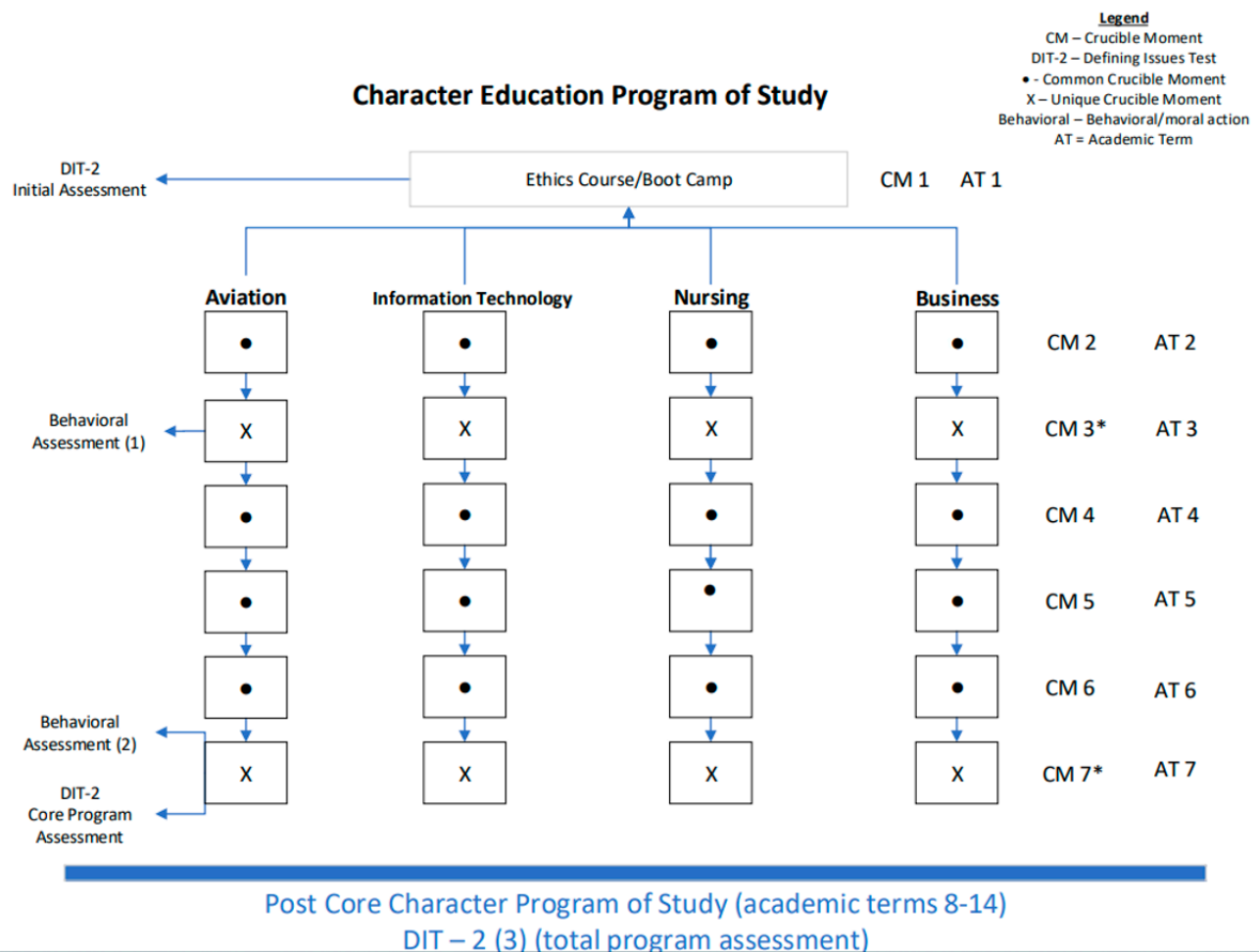
Evaluation	Decision	Knowledge Gained
<b>Wide range of development levels.</b> The first challenge was how best to instruct students with a wide educational and character range.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A need to develop a program capable of creating growth opportunities for a diverse student population.</li> <li>• Utilize mandatory multiple mixed-methods assessments to measure ethical growth. • Utilize both pedagogical and andragogical techniques.</li> <li>• Add adaptive and individualized learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The DIT-2 mandatory quantitative instrument.</li> <li>• A behavioral assessment to measure moral action.</li> <li>• Qualitative information will become part of the assessment process.</li> <li>• Faculty training on adult teaching techniques and adaptive learning instruction.</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of interest in character education.</b> The second challenge was to increase student interest and participation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A need for faculty to become more engaging with students in developing character and ethics.</li> <li>• Highlight the viewpoint of employers on the importance of good character/ethics.</li> <li>• Adopt a theoretical foundation.</li> <li>• Organic integration of character topics and dilemmas within courses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add a certificate in character and ethics, to be awarded after the core character program.</li> <li>• Ensure character assignments are “crucible moments” and engaging.</li> <li>• Faculty training on teaching character and ethics to a diverse non-traditional population. Training on andragogical and pedagogical techniques</li> <li>• Increase employer visits to campus to address the importance of character and ethics in the hiring process and on the job.</li> <li>• Kohlberg's theory of moral development added as the theoretical foundation.</li> </ul>
<b>Limited amount of time or margin.</b> The third challenge was to develop a program fully integrated with academics to minimize the time requirement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve the programmatic integration of academic and character and ethics education.</li> <li>• Evaluate composite weekly assignment load. • Only offer co-curricular activities during school hours.</li> <li>• Ensure character assignments are not overly time-consuming.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revise the program and course objectives to better integrate character and ethics into the academic curriculum.</li> <li>• Ensure crucible assignments can be completed in a minimal timeframe.</li> <li>• Co-curricular activities during school hours</li> </ul>

57, and 44% of participants were military veterans (Beaumont, 2021); therefore, the student body was diverse, with a wide range of life experiences, which heavily influenced their worldviews. In reviewing academic readiness, students matriculated with a wide range of math and English competency skills and how they learn.

We determined one solution to the problem is instructors needed training in mixing pedagogical and andragogical techniques to increase the program's efficacy. Crumly et al. (2014) stated mixing andragogical and pedagogical methods may produce the best results rather than relying only on one or the other. Training faculty in the utilization of adaptive learning methods in the classroom was another solution derived from my meetings with the study site's academic leadership.

I also recognized a quantitative instrument alone is not sufficient for assessment. In the study conducted at the university, the DIT-2 determined

that statistically significant growth in moral judgment levels did not occur, but it could not determine why (Beaumont, 2021). For the future assessment protocol, the university will include the DIT-2 as a mandatory assessment instrument and add qualitative and behavioral assessments throughout the students' academic careers. To truly assess the character program of study, it is necessary to measure if a cognitive disruption occurs and assess if that disruption leads to moral and prosocial actions. One important outcome for the study site is demonstrating the presence or absence of a relationship between cognitive moral development and moral action resulting from the character education program of study. As shown in Figure 1, the DIT-2 will be utilized upon matriculation, after the core character program, and upon graduation. Behavioral assessments will be conducted after the end of the third academic term and during the seventh academic term.



The institution must also develop faculty so they may effectively assess and grow the moral and academic levels of incoming students. Faculty also need to be skilled in determining how each student learns best and incorporate adaptive learning techniques in the classroom. Adding additional qualitative assessments to pair with the quantitative data in the form of a longitudinal study design will provide researchers valuable insights on the reasons moral growth is present or absent in future student cohorts allowing for additional programmatic improvements.

#### *Knowledge Gained from an Observed Lack of Interest in Character Education*

After reviewing several indicators, I determined a general apathy and lack of interest in character and ethics education existed on the part of the student body. The current character education program of study also lacked a theoretical foundation. I recommended, and

the institutional leadership adopted, Kohlberg's theory of moral development as the basis for the program going forward (Kohlberg, 1969). While Kohlberg's theory has deficiencies, the institution felt it was a valid foundational theory when paired with Rest's (1986) four-component model. This model outlines four categories consisting of moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. An individual's moral action results from a combination of the development level of each of these four categories. Rest (1986) rejected Kohlberg's (1969) hard stages and opted for softer, more permeable, schemas. From this, Rest (1986) created the DIT, the instrument for my quantitative study, which activates these moral schemas allowing the measurement of each schema, comparing individual demographic traits and moral reasoning levels (Rest et al., 2000).

Furthermore, for non-traditional commuter students, faculty-student engagement is the critical

relationship that must be cultivated to produce ethical growth effectively. Given the study site is a commuter-based program, most interactions students receive are through the faculty. This differs from traditional residential programs where institutions have opportunities to engage with students in areas such as student life, on-campus housing, on-campus dining, intramurals, and intercollegiate athletics. Therefore, the reflection process revealed the need to develop an official faculty training program on how to teach character and ethics. Additionally, the administration at the study site determined the faculty needed additional instruction on mixing pedagogical and andragogical techniques as well as training to assess how their students learn best. Finally, we realized the academic leadership must continually reinforce the importance of developing an interactive classroom environment.

Another conclusion was character-related course objectives must include crucible moments that are appealing to adult students and allow for reflection. Byrne et al. (2018) supported this approach, claiming “traditional classroom techniques are inadequate for the learning required to convince students of the legitimacy of leader character, to motivate students to truly acknowledge their character deficits” (p. 282). They went on to state these moments must disrupt a student’s “routine ways of thinking” (p. 279). The revised character education program of study includes a crucible moment in each of the first seven academic terms, which comprise the core character program. It also determined that five of the crucible moments would be a common experience among all enrolled students. The other two crucible moments would be unique and tailored to the needs of each academic major.

We also determined to generate enthusiasm the university must highlight the connection between the student’s personal ethical growth to employers’ desired characteristics. Increasing the frequency and variety of employers invited to speak in the classroom, both physical and virtual, helped strengthen that connection and represented a key initiative arising from the reflection process. It was also decided students would be provided a certificate of character education after completing the core program delivered over seven academic terms. We believed that offering recognition of

achievement suitable for inclusion on a resume and display on social media or in an office would serve as an additional incentive.

### *Knowledge Gained from Observations of the Available Margin*

All students participating in the DIT-2 study were non-traditional students as defined earlier in this paper. Most have full or part-time jobs as well as family commitments. Students also carry a full-time load each academic term of three classes or nine hours over eight-week academic terms. Therefore, the university has a limited opportunity to influence moral development. In the classroom, faculty are confronted with a packed curriculum balancing technical, academic, and ethical components. Likewise, adult students have limited time to allocate toward ethical growth when faced with a myriad of competing priorities. The reflection process moved the university to realize a proper integration of character and ethics into the academic curriculum was needed. In addition, all co-curricular activities needed to occur when students were already on-campus.

The first challenge was determining how to balance the overall academic load a student experiences each week and each academic term. The solution developed was to ensure one course in each academic term contained a specific learning objective related to a crucible moment. This solution also caused the reduction of other objectives in these select courses to allow for balance. For the other two courses in each academic term, character and ethics would be woven into the discussion questions and classroom discussion as a course-level objective, but without a crucible assignment.

After reflecting on student participation levels, I realized the pivotal crucible moment experiences in each academic term needed to be something that could be completed promptly. In examining student engagement, I found the longer duration and time commitment on the students’ part resulted in corresponding lower participation rates. Likewise, co-curricular activities outside the classroom needed to be equally brief and impactful. Academic practitioners at the study site were tasked to develop specific crucible events in each academic term that comply with the criteria set above. The co-curricular events included speakers from local companies that hire



the school's graduates, worship services, and other presentations that revolve around character development. All co-curricular events are designed to complement and enhance the academic component of the character development program of study. Furthermore, they were designed to take advantage of breaks in the student's day such as the lunch hour. This minimizes disruption on the part of the students and does not require an additional time commitment.

### REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

The purpose of this study was to reflect on the efficacy of a character education program and develop new strategies to increase learning outcomes in non-traditional students at the chosen study site. The questions that guided the study included: How can the university increase student interest in character and ethical development? How can the university effectively deliver content to students who have little available free time? What is the best methodology to instruct a diverse adult student body in character development? Dewey's (1989) reflective thinking process was my theoretical foundation to create this line of inquiry, develop hypotheses, and recommend a course of action to experimentally answer these questions. The experience of finding the character education program of study failed to meet its goals cultivated my curiosity and drove me to explore the reasons behind the results. According to Dewey (1933), curiosity is a strong motivator, which created a state he describes as "disequilibrium" that I needed to address.

Diversity among those attending higher education institutions continues to increase, including non-traditional students. According to the Lumina Foundation, students over the age of 25 represent 38% of all undergraduate students, and 58% work and attend school simultaneously (EAB, 2019). Therefore, for institutions committed to developing the whole person and growing non-traditional students, it is critical to build programs of character education as part of their mission. This study's limitations included the fact the population enrolled at this university is unique, and the school utilizes a proprietary character education program of study. These factors could limit the ability to generalize the findings to a broader population. However, given

that non-traditional students possess similar characteristics, other institutions with similar populations may benefit from these findings.

The reflective process led the faculty and staff at the study site to revise the core character education program of study to be delivered over seven academic terms (63 credit hours). Students start their journey with a character boot camp, an ethics course, and experience crucible moments in each academic term of the core program. The post-core program, representing the following seven academic terms, will focus on higher-level moral reasoning and ethical concepts. The specific interventions and design of this curriculum have yet to be determined. As part of the ongoing assessment process, the study site plans to utilize knowledge gleaned through the revised character program of study to develop the post-core PLOs and CLOs.

One area for future research is to assess how Dewey's (1989) reflective thinking process occurs in students resulting from the crucible moments in each academic term. After implementing these assignments, the students need to follow the stages outlined by Rodgers (2002) under the direction of a faculty mentor. Students need to evaluate their experience, pose questions, develop hypotheses, and then test those hypotheses through further experiences. One possible assessment method is through a reflection assignment or journaling. Likewise, the study site needs to evaluate if these crucible moments are resulting in the intended effect and moving the moral development needle utilizing the same process.

Qualitative data should be collected via interviews, which can then be used to continue refining the experiential learning component of the character education program of study. A second area for research is collecting qualitative data from alumni to assess how the character and ethics program influenced and continues to influence their lives personally and professionally. This data can be combined with the quantitative data from the DIT-2 (at matriculation, upon completion of the core character program, and at graduation) to develop a comprehensive assessment of how well the university is growing students ethically and how long the effect lasts. The third area of future research is correlating moral reasoning levels to moral behaviors. Creating a behavioral

instrument and correlating those findings with moral judgment scores from the DIT-2 would help gauge the efficacy of the character program. The fourth area of research is assessing employer visits to the classrooms to discuss the value of character and ethics development. Whether they are an alumnus, hiring manager, or executive, the employer's representative serves as an exemplar for students. Therefore, when they speak on the value of character development, it results in a significant positive impact on the student's perception of the character program of study. It is also recommended other schools with different student bodies, especially minority-serving institutions, conduct their character and ethics research to determine the impact of their curriculum on the ethical growth of their students.

### SUMMARY

A lack of research on character and ethical development in non-traditional students and in minority-serving institutions led me to develop an experimental character education program. I assessed the initial version of this program via a pre- and post-test quantitative experiment and discussions with students, faculty, and staff. Based on the assessment data, I engaged in a reflection of the program's challenges and minimal efficacy based on my data and observations, which resulted in identifying root causes and alterations to the character program of study. Ultimately, new knowledge, insights, and practices resulted from the reflective process as offered by Dewey (1989).

The assessment and reflection process led to the development of three main takeaways. Traditional character education interventions are not as effective in non-traditional populations. Non-traditional students matriculate at various academic and moral levels, have busy lives, and institutions need to tie character education to what employers are looking for in their employees to facilitate student engagement. The character education program of study at the institution failed to produce expected outcomes and required enhancements based on my findings.

Another crucial aspect of the reflection process is for the faculty to reflect on the theories presented to character education. A constant evaluation by the faculty on the content allows for the analysis of the efficacy of the character

program course objectives, crucible moments, and classroom discussions. Questions asked during the assessment process include:

- How does the faculty perceive their ability to deliver the content?
- How do the students receive the content, and is it something they find valuable?
- Are the character assignments well-developed, and how well do they align with the character program and course-level outcomes?
- How well does the character education content align with the other course content?
- Is the overall course workload within acceptable standards to meet all course-level objectives?

Furthermore, the institution utilizes end-of-course surveys with questions focused on the character component to provide further insight. This comprehensive ongoing reflective process allows for further programmatic revisions and provides valuable information to the faculty on how to increase their efficacy in the classroom. These efforts develop students' understanding of the importance of character development within the context of their studies and everyday lives, allowing the institution to deliver quality programming in the least amount of time, resulting in efficient and effective content delivery.

To conclude, this report provided an opportunity for key participating stakeholders to clarify their understanding of the current state of character development programs at a minority-serving institution with a large non-traditional population. The faculty and staff at the study site share a long-term goal of refining, supplementing, and reinforcing appropriate program elements toward improved student self-awareness. Furthermore, the study site is committed to developing student enhanced readiness upon graduation to serve as well-educated employees possessing a strong work ethic that is grounded in their own considered values and life-purpose ethic.

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### *Declaration of interests*

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.