

The Character Model for the American University

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The collapse of confidence in American higher education highlights two public concerns about its value: the cost no longer outweighs its economic benefits and colleges and universities have become havens for liberal ideologues whose values are at odds with most Americans. According to a 2011 PEW Research Center Report, a majority of Americans (57%) say that higher education fails to provide students good value for the money they and their families spend and even a larger majority (75%) say college is too expensive.¹ Although 86% of college graduates say that college has been a good investment for them personally and on average earn \$20,000 more than those who did not graduate from a four-year college, they are burdened with student debt.² Nearly half of college graduates (49%) say that paying off debt makes it harder to pay for other bills and a quarter say it has had an impact on their career choice.³ For adults age 18–34 who are not in school and do not have a bachelor’s degree, two-thirds say a major reason for not continuing their education is the need to support their family and nearly half (48%) say they cannot afford college.⁴ This should come to no surprise as college and university tuition and fees have tripled since 1980–81, even after accounting for inflation.⁵

Republicans have grown increasingly negative about the impact of colleges and universities on the U.S.⁶ 58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say that higher education has a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, while just 36% say the effect is positive. By contrast, 72% of Democrats see colleges and universities having a positive impact on the country. This partisan gap can partially be explained by how the two parties see the purpose of college: to teach specific skills and knowledge for the workforce (58% Republicans compared to 43% Democrats) or an opportunity for personal growth (28% Republicans compared to 43% Democrats). Other recent events—such as the controversy over free speech and race on college campuses—have given the impression that American colleges and universities are bastions of liberal ideologies, values contrary to Republicans and Republican-leaning independents.⁷

In spite of Republicans' skepticism about the political, social, and cultural value of American higher education, a majority of them (62%, compared to 73% of Democrats) say higher education does a good job preparing students for the workforce.⁸ This emphasis on preparing students for the workforce is shared by the American public as the primary mission of higher education: 47% say that colleges should teach workforce skills and knowledge and only 39% say that college is to help students grow socially and intellectually.⁹ College and university presidents likewise agree that making students productive members of the workforce is the most important societal role for higher education (74%).¹⁰ Interestingly, citizenship (73%) and access to higher education (72%) were a close second and third objectives for presidents, priorities not considered by either political parties or the American public.¹¹ The consideration of liberal education is not explicitly considered by any of the surveyed groups, although there may be an association between liberal education and the objectives of personal and intellectual growth, which was lowly valued (28% Republicans; 43% Democrats; and 39% American public).¹²

Although college and university presidents see citizenship and access to education as societal priorities for higher education, the public instead sees higher education as essentially a business that is more concerned about its own well-being than educating students or serving communities.¹³ In response to Rawlings' editorial, "College is Not a Commodity. Stop Treating It Like One," Selingo criticizes higher education for promoting the economic benefits of a college degree, the mismatch between curriculum and student success, and the growth of administrative staff at the expense of faculty to make the four-year degree into an "assembly line" experience for students.¹⁴ For Selingo, American higher education is primarily responsible for the public seeing colleges and universities as a business that only looks out for their own interests: students are customers, faculty are employees, and alumni are financial donors.

For faculty, they now exist in an era of technological change, globalization, and deteriorating work conditions: a decrease in financial resources and employment opportunities and an increase of being subject to a variety of accountability and assessment metrics.¹⁵ "Core" faculty—those who are employed as tenured or tenure-track—continue to diminish as "independent contractors" (e.g., adjuncts, post-doctoral fellows) increase, thereby diminishing the faculty's role in university governance.¹⁶ Faculty currently spend more time on learning new technology, committee work and meetings, and preparing for teaching while simultaneously face a falling-off in funded research.¹⁷ Faculty also have noticed a decline in autonomy, with tenure being a particularly

contentious issue with respect to accountability, evaluation, and post-tenure review.¹⁸ Finally, the trend of specialization in both content and role among faculty has only accelerated in the past decade, making the university more fragmented in governance, curriculum, and scholarship.¹⁹ The result is a professoriate that is increasingly treated as an employee rather than a colleague in university life.

American higher education consequently needs to adapt and adjust to the new circumstances that it currently confronts if it wants to preserve its value as a public good that is neither Republican nor Democratic in character. College and university presidents must demonstrate to the public that the values like citizenship and access are equally important to workforce preparedness. Colleges and universities must devise strategies to show that higher education is not a business that operates only out of its self-interest but as a public good where students are treated as learners, faculty as colleagues, and alumni as part of a community that transcends economic considerations. If American higher education wants to be and be perceived as a public value, it must discover new and creative ways to reinvent itself in today's neoliberal, globalized era.²⁰

I suggest a possible model—the character model—for public colleges and universities to consider in this new age of American higher education.²¹ This model is based on the Aristotelian understanding of *phronesis* (prudence) which combines both theoretical and practical reason in the development of character.²² In this article I will explain how *phronesis* can be at the core of a college's or university's mission and then show how the general education curriculum could be adjusted to match this new model, for a revision of the general education curriculum is vital not only for student success but also for the mission and purpose of the college and university. I conclude the article with some thoughts about how faculty and administrators can better align their roles with the character model.

I recognize that this proposal is an ideal type and may not work or even be feasible if implemented. But even if it were not to succeed, I hope that it will at least move the conversation of higher education to a rethinking about what constitutes its core and mission as a public value. The public value of American higher education, particularly its public institutions, has reached a tipping point. It is incumbent upon those who work and believe in the public value of higher education to make a new and different case for it. Failure to do so merely continues the gradual deterioration of one the great public institutions this country has created.²³

The Character Model

Aristotle's understanding of *phronesis* is a form of practical reason while simultaneously connected with theoretical or scientific thinking to guide particular action. *Phronesis* paves a middle path between theoretical reason, which is too rigid and abstract to solve specific problems, and pragmatic calculation which is focused only on what works without understanding why.²⁴ Aristotle defines *phronesis* as the "ability to deliberate well about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general," but one can produce "no demonstration" of its first principles, even though "particular actions were true in practice."²⁵ *Phronesis* can never become a science (*episteme*), which is concerned about first principles that are always the same and true, because its attention to particulars precludes one from starting from universal premises or ending with comprehensive conclusions. Given its variable character, Aristotle instead categorizes *phronesis* as a deliberate intellectual virtue.

This exclusion of *phronesis* from the category of theoretical or scientific reason makes any positivist attempt to evaluate its effectiveness defective: there are no axioms from which one can reason to conclusions or first principles. Yet *phronesis* is not a type of circular reasoning. It is connected to theoretical reason by its intuitive recognition of first principles. For example, a person recognizes that murder is wrong because his or her moral intuition recognizes it as such, although the person does not possess scientific certainty about the wrongfulness of murder. This is different from circular reasoning—a person believes his or her view that murder is wrong because the person believes it to be true—for it does not confuse first principles when a person validates what he or she immediately apprehends. Of course, a person could work him- or herself into a state of doubt about the wrongfulness of murder, but Aristotle would say that such a person is being foolish because these types of experiences are starting points and not the conclusion of inquiry.²⁶

The inability of a person to distinguish and defend first principles is to acknowledge he or she is an incomplete being when compared to the morally experienced or mature person (*phronimos*). But what happens if there is no *phronimos* to whom one can turn? For Aristotle, the answer resides in character formation. The community educates its young in pre-rational versions of virtues that are necessary for social stability and continuity, for, as Aristotle observes, such habituation "teaches right opinion about the first principle."²⁷ This pre-rational education orients young people towards *phronesis* where they eventually form an attachment to it. This incomplete or pre-rational

phronesis is a person's "common sense" that preserves both him- or herself and the community but not enough for either the person or society to achieve excellence.

While Americans value higher education, they value character even more. Asked what it takes a young person to succeed in the world, 61% say a good work ethic is extremely important and 57% say the same about knowing how to get along with people—only 42% say a college education.²⁸ The character model, based on a deliberative intellectual virtue that is both practical and theoretical, is therefore uniquely suited for American higher education to make its case for its public value. Furthermore, the formation of character as both practical and theoretical reason allows American institutions of higher education to distinguish themselves from their societal competitors. Both businesses and governments employ theoretical reason but ultimately for pragmatic ends (i.e., economic, political): theoretical reason is reduced to a practical activity. By contrast, colleges and universities can orient students' practical reasoning to theoretical ends without losing sight of the world of particulars, something which liberal education tends to neglect.²⁹ Navigating between the extremes of unprincipled pragmatism and detached theoreticism, the character model highlights what American higher education can do better than other societal institutions: cultivate a character in students that requires both theoretical and practical reason.³⁰

Given the diversity of institutions in American higher education, there is no need to impose a single normative standard on all colleges and universities. Religious colleges may wish to incorporate theology into their understanding of a character, while public institutions may choose to focus on a responsible and engaged democratic citizenry. The character model allows flexibility for colleges and universities to select an understanding of what constitutes a flourishing human person for that institution and orient students, faculty, and administrators to cultivate practical and theoretical reason towards that end. What is critical is that the model forces colleges and universities to consider what type of character they want to foster in their communities. This is not to deny that colleges and universities should provide the skills and knowledge for their students to be productive members in the workforce or responsible and active citizens. These goals are important but should be secondary to the fostering of character, as only colleges and universities are uniquely situated in society to do this.

The character model therefore calls for a normative understanding of human flourishing specific to American higher education that includes both theoretical and practical reason, and to orient

colleges and universities in their teaching, research, and service towards that end. Other societal institutions, such as businesses and governments, lack a combination or balance between theoretical and practical reason and consequently are deficient in their understanding of human flourishing. Institutions of American higher education are uniquely suited for this task because they have the resources to cultivate a specific character in their students and they can encourage their faculty and administrators to partake in this *ethos*. Within the university itself, the character model can help bridge the gap between programs that are too theoretical (e.g., liberal education) and practical (e.g., professional training). The need for both theoretical and practical reason obliges faculty and administrators to learn from each other and thereby overcome the programmatic fragmentation and content specialization that characterizes today's higher education.

The character model thus forces students, faculty, and administrators to think about what should constitute the core mission of their institution and explain it to a public that already believes character is the critical factor for a person's success. By making character central to their mission, colleges and universities can not only organize themselves intellectually and practically around this objective but also make a public case about the value of higher education that is different from workforce preparedness or democratic citizenship. Colleges and universities cannot compete with businesses and governments in these economic and political goals because these activities primarily employ practical rather than theoretical reason, whereas the higher education can do both. By informing the public that only they are uniquely suited to cultivate a certain type of character that requires both theoretical and practical reason, colleges and universities can hopefully improve the public's understanding of their value in society.

General Education

General education programs are to impart to undergraduate students basic knowledge, or at least exposure, to a variety of disciplines in order to know how to study and live in a meaningful way. The first American institution of higher education to offer a general education curriculum was Harvard in 1825: students were free to choose courses according to their interests in subjects, although the range of choice was limited and the type of courses were liberal arts rather than professional or vocational ones.³¹ Over time general education has become the primary mode to introduce students to a college's curriculum and often is conflated with liberal education itself. Steiner defines general education as "common education" for any person and that liberal

education, “being education for democracy, hence is general education.”³² Thus, the decline of the value of liberal education in the United States is also a decline in the value of general education itself, prompting several colleges and universities to revisit these programs because student learning outcomes are not being met and the failure to create a clear and consistent identity among faculty and students.³³

Besides a core or a Great Books curriculum, the alternative to general education program is competency-based education where students learn one skill at a time, which is a small component of a larger learning goal, before proceeding to the next competency to master.³⁴ Students can skip learning modules entirely if they can demonstrate they already have mastery of them as evaluated by a form of testing. Unlike general education programs, competency-based education does not rely upon the credit hour for a student’s degree completion and has been adopted by some for-profit universities.³⁵ Although there has been criticism of competency-based education, it is increasingly becoming a viable alternative to general education programs at American colleges and universities.³⁶ In the near future, colleges and universities will have to confront the choice of whether to retain and reform their general education programs or abandon them and instead adopt competency-based education.

By ending general education programs, colleges and universities would devote themselves to practical reasoning at the expense of theoretical or scientific thinking, as competency-based education is more suitable for professional and vocational training. It would also align colleges and universities to the singular goal of preparing students for the workforce rather than character development, civic engagement, personal and intellectual growth, or other non-economic objectives. For some institutions of higher education this may be a necessary or a forward-looking move, while for others it might be contrary to their institution’s mission, student body wishes, faculty interest, and alumni demands. For those institutions who do not want to adopt competency-based education, it is essential for those colleges and universities to reform their general education programs in such a manner to provide a public reason why general education is preferable to competency-based education.

While most colleges and universities share a common set of learning outcomes that entail a broad range of skills and knowledge, there has been no increase of greater understanding of these goals among students.³⁷ To remedy this situation, there has been an emphasis on integration of knowledge, skills, and application in general education programs, although fewer than two in five

require experiential learning.³⁸ This integration usually was an applied or digital project (e.g., e-portfolios) that was conducted at the end of the general education program with most schools employing the distribution model.³⁹ However, this recent emphasis on integration reveals that students are not able to synthesize what they have learned in their general education programs. As a result, students—and the public—do not see the point of taking general education: they are just requirements one needs to fulfill before the real work begins in one's major field.

This need to integrate knowledge comports with the character model in two ways. First, depending upon what type of character a college or university wishes to cultivate, all the courses in the general education program would be oriented towards that conception of character or human flourishing. For example, if a college decides that it wants to cultivate a responsible, democratic citizenry in its students, then a course in the sciences would have to be taught in that context: the study of biology in a general education program would not be isolated to its own discipline but presented in the context of a responsible, democratic citizen. This does not necessarily mean a “dumbing down” of content in biology—students would still need to master the fundamentals of that science—but students would be required to think beyond the narrow disciplinary parameters of their courses to the larger question of character. The courses in the general education program therefore would be given a context where students would be able to integrate their knowledge from specific classes.

In other words, colleges and universities would require the theme of character to make their general education programs intellectually coherent to students. To accomplish this, faculty would be required to revise their courses and coordinate with one another to provide a seamless and comprehensible general education program. Faculty should be encouraged and allowed to innovate to see what type of teaching pedagogies and techniques would be most effective, whether team-teaching, bimonthly meetings, coordination of syllabi in terms of themes and approaches, and reserving time in each course for students to integrate what they have learned from other classes with their current course content. Another possibility is to remove the disciplinary designation for general education courses (e.g., BIO 101) and instead mark them as general education (i.e., GEN 101), allowing faculty from any discipline to teach them. A third idea is to have a seminar as the capstone course of the general education program where students would have to synthesize their knowledge. Regardless of how it is implemented, the general education program will only be

successful if faculty are willing to step outside their disciplinary boundaries and coordinate and communicate among themselves.

Second, the character model allows integration of skills, knowledge, and application not only across the general education program but also within courses by having students learn both theoretical and practical reason in their course. Students would be required to learn the theoretical knowledge of a subject but also learn how to practice or apply it, as in a laboratory, internship, service-learning, or civic engagement activity.⁴⁰ For instance, a geography student would not only learn the foundations behind GIS but then show how to use it in an assignment, like mapping violent crimes in a local city. The student would also be required to demonstrate how his or her theoretical and practical reason is related to the larger question of character. Thus, the student learns not only theoretical and practical reason in a specific subject but is given a larger context to understand how these skills, knowledge, and application are valuable.

By having students learn both practical and theoretical reason in a general education program that is intellectually coherent and oriented by the college's or university's mission, the character model can make a public case for the value of American higher education. The public is already primed favorably towards character and colleges and universities are uniquely situated to teach character in a way that is different from other societal institutions, thereby demonstrating their value to the public. This "product differentiation" should be embraced by American colleges and universities if they wish to retain their public value. And there is no greater opportunity to demonstrate this product than a reformed general education program that emphasizes the character model to students and the public.

Conclusion

Besides playing an instrumental role in reforming general education programs, how else would faculty and administrators fit into the character model for American higher education? For faculty, the character model can provide an orientation in their research and service. Faculty can continue in their disciplinary research and service but also could explore the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) which could not only contribute to the mission of colleges and universities in teaching students but also demonstrate to the public the value of higher education. The value of teaching is a value that the public can understand and accept. Faculty therefore should consider

undertaking research in SoTL to not only become better teachers but show the value of their research to the public.⁴¹

While SoTL may be a politically strategic way to communicate the value of colleges and universities, this proposal also has potential problems. First, there is some research that does not fit either in the SoTL or STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) paradigms.⁴² Scholarship in the liberal arts disciplines, like Kantian epistemology or medieval choral music, would particularly be susceptible to not being supported. And although this type of research would continue, the emphasis of SoTL and STEM may devalue this type of scholarship within academia and the public which, in turn, raises questions about career advancement like tenure, promotion, and grant applications. These and other issues is where administrators, along with faculty, will have to determine what is to be valued at their institution and whether those values align with their understanding of character.

Creating the conditions where excellent teaching, research, and service can occur is the fundamental task of a college or university administrators. They will have to work with faculty, students, and the public to determine what type of character, what kind of human flourishing, their institution should cultivate. This may require some difficult changes, as the selection of one type of character will inevitably be at the expense of others and thereby potentially alienate and anger certain communities. But even with the costs of selecting a type of character to orient the college or university, it is a better option than choosing a character that is broadly-defined, ambiguous, and, in short, means nothing because it could be interpreted as anything (e.g., “the future leaders of tomorrow”). For the character model to be successful, it has to be specific to an institution so students, faculty, administrators, and the public know exactly what that college or university is, even if they have reservations or disagreements about it.

Administrators and faculty therefore may consider changing the work conditions of the academic profession, such as encouraging teaching general education or restructuring departments for interdisciplinary studies.⁴³ These and other reforms may return colleges and universities to their primary mission of teaching undergraduates, with faculty paying more attention to teaching than to receiving recognition from their peers in specialized publications. Administrators may examine the best practices at other institutions of higher education and society to see how best to create work conditions to promote their mission of cultivating character in their colleges and universities.

The character model consequently is to ask the various communities in higher education—the public, administrators, faculty, and students—what type of human person they want to foster and promote in society. The answer will vary according to institution and community but a serious reflection upon what it means to be human, what type of character one should cultivate, returns American higher education to an activity for which it is uniquely suited rather than imitating the branding of businesses, nonprofits, and governments. American higher education needs to rethink and reclaim what makes it different from other societal institutions, if it wants to show its public value. Again, I do not claim the character model is *the* answer to this problem—I am open to better and different ideas than the one presented—but it is *an* answer that draws upon the tradition and resources of higher education. For it may be the case that for American higher education to move forward, it has to reflect upon its own past.

Notes

1. PEW, *Is College Worth It?* 5–6, 9; also see Riley; Newfield, *The Great Mistake*; Clynes; Caplan.
2. Ibid. 6–10, 36–37, 45. Americans owe approximately \$1.3 trillion in student debt in 2017, more than two and a half times more than a decade earlier. PEW, “Five Facts about Student Loans”; also see PEW, “Six Key Findings about Going to College.”
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. 28–29, 39–40.
5. Ibid. 26–27, 32.
6. PEW, “Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions”; also see Newfield, “The Nation’s Electoral Divisions Highlight Questions about the Role of Public Universities.”
7. A fifth of American college undergraduates say it is acceptable to use physical force to silence a speaker who makes “offensive and hurtful statements” (Villasenor). Also see Slater; Ben-Porath; Chemerinsky and Gillman; Scruton. For the most recent race

controversy on college campuses, see Quintana; see also Byrd; Ross. Although the actual impact that faculty have on students' ideologies is minimal, the public perception is otherwise; see Gross and Simmons.

8. PEW, "Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions."
9. The remaining 14% believe both missions are equally important; see PEW, *Is College Worth It?* 48–49.
10. PEW, *Is College Worth It?* 61–63.
11. The other objectives are conducting research to solve national problems (54%), contributing to regional economic development (52%), providing continual education to adults of all ages (37%), and providing cultural enrichment to the local community (17%). *Ibid.* For more about access to higher education, see Hacker and Dreifus.
12. The literature about the challenges confronting liberal education, particularly the humanities, and possible remedies is enormous. For a summary, see Trepanier, *Why the Humanities Matter Today* ix–xvi.
13. For more about how the neoliberal university perceives itself no longer as a public good, see Apple; Giroux, "Introduction: Critical Education or Training" and "Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education"; Gould; Powers; Bok; Washburn; Hill and Kumar; Tuchman; Canaan and Shumar; Kaufman-Osborn; King-White.
14. Rawlings; Selingo.
15. Warner; Srigley, "Dear Parents"; Finkelstein, et al. 7, 12–18, 245.
16. *Ibid.* 96; also see Ginsberg.
17. *Ibid.* 241–65; also see Flaherty.
18. *Ibid.* 298–307; also see Kaufman-Osborn; Srigley, "Whose University Is It Anyway?"
19. *Ibid.* 450–67.

20. For more about American higher education existing in an era of globalization, see *ibid.* 378–482 and Mittleman.
21. The exclusion of private colleges and universities is that their missions and strategies do not necessarily have to take the public into account, whereas public institutions by their very nature do. The rise of for-profit colleges and universities are another challenge which public institutions have to address and have failed to do so far. Hentschke and Lechuga; Angulo; Cottom.
22. Trepanier, “A Philosophy of Prudence and the Purpose of Higher Education Today.”
23. Nearly four out of ten college and university presidents say that higher education is moving in the wrong direction (38%) and only one out of five presidents say the U.S. system of higher education is the best in the world. PEW, *Is College Worth It?* 57–58.
24. Beiner; Barber; Salkever; Steinberger. For more about *phronesis*, see Trepanier, “A Philosophy of Prudence and the Purpose of Higher Education Today.”
25. Aristotle 1140a24–1140b30; 1142a11–30; 1146b35–1146a7. Translations are my own.
26. *Ibid.* 1095b6.
27. *Ibid.* 1151a15–20.
28. PEW, *Is College Worth It?* 50.
29. Trepanier, *Why the Humanities Matter Today*.
30. Religious institutions also may be able to play a public role similar to the universities in cultivating a character in its members that uses both practical and theoretical reason. However, public support for religion has declined whereas higher education institutions, albeit questioned, has not. Putnam and Campbell; Jones.
31. Herbst 223; Kimball 332; Fitzpatrick.
32. Steiner 6.

33. Harvard and Duke are the latest universities to revisit their general education programs. Flaherty. For more about the decline of the value of liberal education, see Trepanier, *Why the Humanities Matter Today* ix–xvi.
34. Voorhees; Daugherty, Davis, and Miller; Rasmussen, Northrup, and Colson.
35. Cooper; Fain.
36. For more about the criticisms of competency-based education, see Fitzpatrick.
37. Hart 3–5. The skills to be imparted to students by the general education programs are writing; critical, analytic, ethical, and quantitative reason; oral communication; civic engagement; intercultural and research skills; and information literacy; and the types of knowledge were classified as science, mathematics, humanities, global culture, sustainability, American history, technology, foreign languages, and the arts. Ibid. 15.
38. Ibid. 6–9.
39. Ibid. 12–13.
40. For more about service-learning and civic formation, see Trepanier, “A Philosophy of Prudence and the Purpose of Higher Education Today” 14.
41. For more about this problem and how SoTL might ameliorate it, see Trepanier, “The Relevance of Political Philosophy and Political Science” and “SoTL as a Subfield for Political Science Graduate Programs.”
42. The STEM paradigm is understandable and valued by the public because of the utilitarian benefits it brings to society.
43. Taylor; Schaefer.

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