

PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

Cultivation of Character for Ethical Leadership: The Department of Leadership Education at Culver Academies

Evan Dutmer, Culver Academies

ABSTRACT

Since 1894, Culver Academies has aimed to develop leaders of character. Rooted in the military academy and boarding school traditions, Culver has centered leadership development around central virtues and values. In 1986, recognizing the need to provide integrated, successive leadership learning experiences for students across 4 years, Culver instituted a standalone academic Department of Leadership Education. The Department of Leadership Education, housed in the Schrage Leadership Center, is unique among secondary boarding schools in offering four successive academic leadership education classroom experiences alongside Student Life curricula. Each year's curriculum is centered in a transformational leadership framework, utilizing evidence-based tools to guide students' leadership and character growth at each level. Ultimately, students' growth is assessed by faculty (and students themselves) according to core leadership and character competencies developed by the Academies. Continual improvement of the department is ensured through a comprehensive triennial review process. The aim of this article is to illustrate a successful, iterative character and leadership education experience in a 4-year secondary school context.

Keywords: leadership, character education, virtues, values, transformational leadership, competencies

CONTACT Evan Dutmer ✉ evan.dutmer@culver.org

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2024, 11: 277 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v11.277>

Introduction

The mission of the Culver Academies is to educate “students for leadership and responsible citizenship in society by developing and nurturing the whole individual—mind, spirit, and body—through integrated programs that emphasize the cultivation of character” (About Culver Academies, 2023). Culver lives out this mission across two constituent academies—Culver Military Academy and Culver Girls Academy. Following in the military academy tradition, each academy is organized around the school’s foundational virtues and values (Zanetti, 2020; Metcalf & Heller, 2022). The Culver Virtues align with the High Six Virtues of the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues: wisdom, courage, justice, moderation, humanity, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The values, again evidencing the influence of the US military, are honor, truth, duty, service.

In 1986, Culver Academies inaugurated the Department of Leadership Education, marking a significant step toward fostering an integrated, consistent leadership education experience for every student. The driving force behind this initiative was the conviction that while the Honor Code, Code of Conduct, and Student Life curricula left students well-prepared for their personal and career futures, a unified, integrated leadership education experience would further guarantee virtues- and values-based leadership development for every student. Led by the Committee on the Culver Experience, this department was designed to harness the institution’s diverse program offerings in pursuit of a unified goal: producing exemplary leaders of character who aimed to selflessly serve their communities.

In other words, at Culver, leadership and character were already *caught* (through the Student Life curriculum) and *sought* (through the inculcation of the Culver Code of Conduct and other aspirational creeds); but it remained for the Academies to make sure that leadership and character were consistently and com-

prehensively *taught* in academic, classroom settings (Arthur et al., 2022).

Over the past three and a half decades, the Department of Leadership Education, housed in the Schrage Leadership Center, has evolved while maintaining the unwavering focus on the overarching aim of cultivating leaders and citizens of character. The department remains committed to educating whole individuals who embody the virtues and values necessary for responsible citizenship and developing the capacity to inspire others within a democratic society (Bass & Bass, 2008). Rooted in Culver’s virtues and values, the curriculum merges ancient and contemporary virtue ethics, leadership studies, psychology, and positive organizational scholarship (POS) to deliver a comprehensive and iterative educational experience for each student.

Leadership as a Co-Constructed Process

Building on the seminal work of James MacGregor Burns, the department views leadership as a collaborative process shared between leaders and followers, transcending traditional hierarchical roles, and in service to elevating ends. Accordingly, the department agrees with Burns when he writes that “[transformational leadership] occurs when [leaders and their followers] ... raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation” (Burns, 1978, p. 20). Burns critical of understandings of leadership that exaggerated the role of designated leaders, argued that leadership is a process in which power is derived from a relationship between leaders and followers. Burns underscored the significance of the relationships between leaders and followers and highlighted the ways in which leaders and followers can mobilize one another bi-directionally. This has been called understanding leadership “as a co-constructed process” (Northouse, 2022, p. 364; see also Kotter, 1990).

The result is energizing leadership that can bond teams, transform organizations, and elevate individuals’

character (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Sosik & Jung, 2018). This understanding of leadership draws inspiration from historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, contemporary voices like Malala Yousafzai, Pope Francis I, and Indra Nooyi, and extensive social science research on organizational effectiveness demonstrating how transformational leadership can catalyze positive change on personal and societal levels (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

A Focus on Virtues and Values: Authentic Transformational Leadership and Positive Organizational Scholarship

The department's approach to leadership education is underpinned by Culver's Virtues and Values. Far from advancing a "naked power-wielding" analysis of leadership, the department aims to draw on renewed interest in ethical, values-driven leadership in the last 50 years (Ciulla, 2012, 2014; Jones, 2023; Lamb et al., 2022). The department emphasizes the concept of leadership as a catalyst for personal and collective growth—especially with respect to human potential. Leaders are envisioned as agents of positive transformation who not only uplift themselves but also elevate their followers and team members, all in pursuit of better societies and human flourishing (Cameron & Winn, 2012).

The department educates, then, for what has been called "authentic transformational leadership" (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Sosik, 2015). Authentic transformational leadership is understood as transformational leadership that is rooted in leaders' and followers' mutual pursuit of the good and character development and growth, namely, virtues and flourishing for individuals and societies (Sosik, 2015).

This ideal of authentic transformational leadership connects to the department's broader commitments to educate students in the foundations of POS. Students learn how virtuousness in organizations has been connected to greater effectiveness on traditional

measures of workplace performance while noting the power of strengths to improve individuals' subjective well-being and engagement in organizational contexts (Cameron, 2021; Miglianico et al., 2020). Consequently, a strengths-based approach using the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (including students taking the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) Assessment each calendar year) is employed at each grade level. John Yeager led the integration of VIA Strengths across Leadership Education curricula beginning with his arrival in 2007 (Yeager et al., 2011). Further, the department serves a leadership role within Culver as a resource for enacting positive leadership practices among faculty and staff to enhance virtuousness across the entire organization.

Curriculum Design: An Integrated Path to Transformational Leadership for Each Student

The academic journey through the Department of Leadership Education is carefully structured to instill transformational leadership at each stage of a student's education and run alongside and in complement to the athletic, extracurricular, and Student Life residential curricula at each grade level. The current core iteration of courses in the department were co-created by a core teaching team and has been in place since 2014. These courses are (in order from grades 9 to 12): Learning Living Leading (LLL), Teaming and Thinking (TNT), Ethics and the Cultivation of Character (ECC), and Senior Leadership Reflection (SLR). Throughout each course, instructors take care to order their experiential learning designs around core learning strategies that have been recently identified as the "Seven Strategies for Leadership and Character Development" (Lamb et al., 2022). These strategies (virtue practice, virtuous exemplars, virtue literacy, moral reminders, reflection, systems awareness, and friendships of mutual accountability) serve as helpful guides to in-class instruction and help to further ground the experiential emphasis of the course design across the department (Kolb, 1984).

9th Grade: Living, Learning, Leading

A student's leadership education journey begins with a required 9th grade leadership, learning, well-being, and belonging course. This course builds on an understanding that leadership begins as "self-management" (Drucker, 2005). Self-awareness, character development, well-being, power awareness, implicit and explicit biases, and bias mitigation are emphasized. Students take the VIA Strengths Inventory as a first step of strengths spotting, connecting institutional virtues and values to those present in evidence-based positive psychology. Students engage in a wellness module in support of institutional aims in health and well-being and continue this learning through an integrated wellness check-in running throughout the course. Further, students engage in basic routines of Social Emotional Character Development, especially through emotional self-awareness and self-regulation using the Mood Meter, developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (Brackett, 2019).

Committed to a vision of leadership education that honors the structures of individual human brains and learning, students also learn how to learn best through a basic understanding of the science of learning and relevant brain science (Barrett, 2020; Willingham, 2022). Key to this portion of the course is students' engagement with growth mindset research and examination of their own academic mindsets (Dweck, 2007).

Students use these resources in engaging in early study of transformational leadership. Students familiarize themselves with the five practices model of exemplary leadership and reflect on exemplary leadership they witness around campus and how they could leverage their VIA Strengths to effect those practices themselves in varied team contexts (Kouzes & Posner, 2018).

10th Grade: Teaming and Thinking

In the 10th grade course, *TNT*, students embark on an in-depth study of teams, team dynamics, and effective

teaming. Using a transformational framework which emphasizes the bidirectional processes of leadership, students analyze their existing teams for varied leadership actions and reflect on both effective and ineffective teams they have participated in. The department utilizes the Five Behaviors model of effective teaming for this reflection (Lencioni, 2011). Students conclude their experience with a presentation describing an exemplar effective team and setting goals for future teams and team leadership positions they will occupy in their 11th grade year. This course nurtures experiential learning in complex human groups, empathy, problem-solving, and an appreciation for diverse perspectives in team environments.

11th Grade: Ethics and the Cultivation of Character

The 11th grade course, *ECC*, is a graduation requirement for every student. It consists of an enacted, practiced virtue ethics course and a deeper introduction to an ethical leadership model via authentic transformational leadership. Students study ancient origins of contemporary virtue ethics and positive psychology through Aristotle, Confucius, and other character-based ethics around the world (Dutmer, 2022). Further, students apply their learning through several applied reflective exercises—for instance, constructing a goal hierarchy that leverages their VIA Signature Strengths in service of drafting possible "ultimate concerns" (Duckworth, 2016). The Seven Strategies complement the curriculum for the course and, in particular, assist in guiding the structure of the applied experiences.

The application backbone for the course is an ongoing Character Lab that runs throughout the entire course. It is a weeklong intention-setting and evidence-gathering exercise that allows students to chart their growth toward mastery of particular virtues and character strengths. Growth in the virtues over the 9-week experience is ordered around a spiral curriculum model, as has previously been developed at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (Arthur et al., 2017). Contem-

porary topics in leadership studies introduced include emotional intelligence, empathy, and leadership applications of the dual process theory (fast and slow thinking). The course provides opportunities for competency performance via an interview for an imagined student leadership position of character integrator (modeled on some of the recent curricular work at the United States Military Academy), an ethical film analysis podcast (ethical films viewed and studied include *SELMA*, *12 Angry Men*, and *He Named Me Malala*), and a final written performance reflection that draws on each weekly Character Lab and is assessed around evidence of growth in the five leadership education competencies.

12th Grade: Senior Leadership Reflection

Each senior engages in a comprehensive reflective experience on competencies across 4 years of leadership experience, drawing on extensive research in educational psychology emphasizing the importance of developing students' reflective capacity for deeper learning (Lamb et al., 2022). Students craft an essay that reflects on summative performances relating to each of the core leadership competencies. These reflections offer an opportunity for both celebration of accomplishment for students while also providing excellent evidential opportunities for competency assessment by the SLR faculty facilitator. The department collects a repository of qualitative evidence of students' leadership experience that could be used for future internal and external research.

Electives: Psychology and Psychology of Leadership

Building on its deep curricular connections with contemporary psychology, the Department of Leadership Education also offers an introductory and advanced course in psychology. Both focus on positive psychology and the psychology of leadership. Psychology of Leadership is an upper-division course taught as an introduction to POS, focusing on virtues and strengths development in complex human organizations. The concluding performance for the course consists of an academic literature review on an area of POS of students' choosing.

Senior Elective Capstone: Honors Seminar in Leadership Education—The Theory and Practice of Leadership (HIL)

An Honors Seminar in the Theory and Practice of Leadership offers advanced students an opportunity for continued study of leadership through a college-level seminar in Transformational Leadership, culminating in creation of research papers in conversation with contemporary leadership studies, presented before the Department of Leadership Education. Students simultaneously engage in a college course in Leadership Studies while practicing essential academic skills for upper-level collegiate research. The research paper is understood as an academic service to the Academies community.

Leadership Education by Design

As part of its most recent triennial review process, the department engaged in a thorough renovation of its curricular documents using the Understanding by Design (UBD) framework in 2022–2023 (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Key to this work is the crafting of shared core understandings and essential questions for our students' leadership education careers. These core understandings and essential questions can be integrated horizontally and vertically across courses according to the spiral curriculum previously discussed. In this way, students are able to engage with core knowledge and understandings at greater levels of complexity over successive years.

The department has arrived at some of the following core leadership understandings and essential questions to guide its work:

Sample Enduring Understandings

Virtues are alive, and to be lived, and practiced.

As virtues are applied and practiced, human beings can improve and continue to strive for a eudaimonistic life.

Ethical leadership in teams requires continual character improvement among leaders and followers toward ends that contribute to overall human flourishing.

Transformational leadership requires transformation (higher levels of character and higher levels of productivity/engagement/motivation) from both leaders and followers.

Leadership requires an understanding of human behavior and attitudes.

Leadership can be understood as a co-constructed process (between leaders and followers) in human organizations.

Leadership is a phenomenon in human organizations that can be studied using the tools of psychology.

Organizational culture impacts employee performance and well-being.

Leadership practices can be taught and are improvable. Certain team member behaviors can enhance teamwork; others can hinder it.

Service is promoting the welfare of others in the community.

Sample Essential Questions

What is leadership?

Who is a leader? Who is a follower?

What does good leadership look like?

How do I improve and grow as a leader?

How can I connect my philosophy of leadership with my practice of leadership?

How do I live out my philosophy of leadership in my community?

How do I help develop and nurture others for leadership?

What observable evidence is there for effective leadership?

Each level of the curriculum offers successive opportunities to engage with these understandings and questions at great sophistication and depth. Further,

cross-course agreement on foundational key understandings enhances student learning across course experiences (Bruner, 1960; Mehta & Fine, 2019).

Competencies of Character and Leadership Education

Evaluation of Culver's leadership and character education has evidenced the need for continued development of the department's evaluation methods. Further, Culver has enacted an institution-wide adoption of competency-based learning. As part of this curricular evolution, Culver has developed a draft of competencies around five core distinguishing characteristics of a Culver graduate: leadership, scholarship, communication, well-being, and citizenship. These competencies were developed by cross-campus, interdisciplinary drafting teams aiming for maximum interdepartmental feedback and ownership of the competencies. Each of these core distinguishing characteristics is accompanied by 4–6 competencies. Accordingly, the department has begun and continues to make important changes in its assessment of student growth through adoption of five core leadership performance competencies and four process competencies.

The Department of Leadership Education, following a growing number of educational institutions, has begun to assess student growth according to two sets of competencies: performance competencies and process competencies (Paulson Gjerde et al., 2017). The performance competencies under "Leadership" are:

Positively Influencing: A Culver graduate practices effective leadership approaches by positively influencing others.

Achieving Goals: A Culver graduate achieves goals for personal growth aimed at improving their contribution to their team or group.

Modeling and Empowering: A Culver graduate serves as a model for peers and empowers leaders

and followers in order to support community values and the group's purpose.

Serving Communities: A Culver graduate fulfills their responsibilities and engages in meaningful acts of service in order to improve their communities.

Power Awareness: A Culver graduate recognizes the power dynamics inherent in systems, events, and circumstances and that change is made by working within or challenging existing systems.

The process competencies are collaboration, iteration, perseverance, and behaving honorably. These are shared across the campus rather than being the possession of any single department. This is indicative of broad agreement across departments and disciplines that these competencies are important habits for students to develop as learners and leaders in the campus community. They are as follows:

Iteration. A Culver graduate engages in cycles of practice, feedback, reflection, and revision to improve.

Collaboration. A Culver graduate shares responsibility for group goals, exchanging ideas and questions with respect and humility.

Perseverance. A Culver graduate perseveres in the face of setbacks through their own agency or by seeking appropriate assistance.

Behaving Honorably. A Culver graduate speaks up for and acts on behalf of what is right and holds themselves and others accountable for what they do and say.

The proficiency indicators—established by a school wide calibration—are *distinguished*, *proficient/distinguished*, *proficient*, *developing/proficient*, *developing* corresponding to traditional grade point averages of 4.0, 3.7, 3.4, 3.0, and 2.7. Faculty regularly meet to calibrate standards within levels and across the depart-

ment and offer students chances to assess their own proficiency according to rubrics for each of the above competencies.

Measurement and Evaluation

Following its most recent triennial review process, the department has identified key areas for growth and improvement in the coming years. First, Culver is uniquely positioned to engage in leadership and character research on its campus. The department has committed to engage in measurement of student progress in its curricula using standard tools. For example, the department plans to provide for each student assessment of leadership behaviors in a transformational framework through the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Further, following the example of the Jubilee Centre of Character and Virtues, the department will build on its work assessing student character strengths and development through a process of triangulation (Kristjánsson, 2015). VIA-IS Assessments, on this method, can be combined with other measures of character development, especially those that aim to activate virtue-relevant schemas in students (Walker et al., 2017). Along with teachers' assessment of students' progress toward the leadership and character competencies outlined earlier, this process of triangulation will help to produce a fuller snapshot of students' character and character development over a Culver academic career.

Fully Integrated Programs

Next, the department recognizes the need to continue deepening integration of its leadership and character development aims across campus and between its two constituent academies, Culver Girls Academy and Culver Military Academy. Student Life, extracurricular, and athletic areas offer excellent opportunities for continued collaboration and development of the leadership performance and process competencies outlined earlier. The shared leadership competencies—identical across campus and both academies—will greatly accelerate

this collaboration. With a central repository of student competencies, faculty and staff across the Academies will be able to offer feedback regarding students' progress. Further, given the connections between positive psychology and the science of well-being (PERMA Theory of Well-Being - Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment), there exist opportunities for continued and deeper collaboration with the Department of Wellness. As the department leverages its programming in support of these complementary departments, it will assist in achieving the overarching mission of the Academies.

Conclusion

Culver Academies has striven to educate and mold leaders of character since its inception in 1894. The Department of Leadership Education, founded in 1986, is a key part of that mission. The Department of Leadership Education has ensured each student receives a reflective, charted course of leadership and character growth as a graduation requirement. Through a 4-year sequence of course offerings, Culver offers a unique level of ethical and leadership training for high schoolers in a US context. Given the recognized need and continued desire for character and leadership development programs that engage students to learn more deeply beyond standalone course experiences, Culver Academies Department of Leadership Education stands as an important example among secondary schools that aim to cultivate the whole person.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges and thanks current and former colleagues in the Department of Leadership Education and senior administration at Culver Academies for their energy, collegiality, leadership, support, and vision in aiding in the continued success of this department. The author would like to thank Don Fox, Susan Freymiller deVillier, Joshua Pretzer, Jacqueline Carrillo, Emily Uebler, Deirdre Dolan, Kevin MacNeil, John Yeager, Stephanie Scopelitis, and Chris Kline, in particular.

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