The Necessity of Character

Moral Formation and Leadership in Our Time

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Principled Innovation in the New American University

Michael M. Crow and Ted M. Cross

Today, we're seeing an increasing skepticism about the value of a college education. According to some of the most vociferous critics, unless you're fortunate enough to have been admitted to one of America's most elite universities, college isn't worth the exorbitant cost. For example, the cofounder of PayPal, Peter Thiel, writes: "Before long, spending four years in a lecture hall with a hangover will be revealed as an antiquated debt-fueled luxury good."[1] Meanwhile, other critics, though not dismissing a college education altogether, maintain that research universities are basically trying to do *too many things at once*. Universities, say *these* critics, should jettison one or more of their three historic goals: (1) advancing the frontiers of knowledge, (2) preparing students for professional life, and (3) helping student embark upon lives of meaning and purpose.[2]

In our view, however, each of these three aims—differently put as the pursuit of truth, the training of professionals, *and* the formation of character—are interdependent and essential, particularly in public institutions. The New American University model, established to manage the "tensions between broad accessibility and academic excellence to maximize social impact,"[3] *also* needs to educate for principles and values. The recent journey of Arizona State University (ASU), where we both work, has revolved around the realization that it's not enough to be the most innovative university in the country if the academic community fails to honor fundamental principles both when advancing research and teaching students. Here, we unpack the three assumptions informing the approach we've come to call "principled innovation": first, that universities are *inescapably* sites of character formation; second, that the necessity of that task is revealed by what happens when character is compromised in public life; and third, that *public* universities require a sufficiently capacious conception of character education to serve pluralistic societies.

First, then, colleges are more than merely job-training centers. College is a site of formation, a crucible of character, a venue where a young person has an opportunity—at a key juncture in her life—to consider what kind of person she wants to become.

What does "character education" entail, though? Character education is best understood as a reflective process that enables students to flourish. And flourishing involves more than merely fleeting moments of happiness. Rather, as many Eastern and Western philosophical and religious traditions maintain, flourishing—or what Aristotle terms *eudaimonia*—is the "point" or purpose of life. To flourish is to *realize our potential as human beings*. Similarly, according to Jeffrey Rosen, the American Framers reconceived of happiness *as flourishing*. When the Declaration of Independence speaks of "the pursuit of happiness," what's in question is the pursuit of *being* good rather than simply *feeling* good. Rosen adds:

> If you had to sum it up in one sentence, the classical definition of the pursuit of happiness meant being a lifelong learner, with a commitment to practicing the daily habits that lead to character improvement, self-mastery, flourishing, and growth.[4]

Therefore, while formation is not a core institutional goal for many public universities,[5] at ASU, "principled innovation" entails a strong emphasis on virtue and values and creating spaces for students to explore whether they want to, and whether they can, walk the road to character.

One practical example of this is Dreamscape Learn, the virtual reality (VR) unit at ASU that is currently developing a new chemistry class. Since it is a class many students must take, we're using it to help students simultaneously develop character as well as master content knowledge. During the course, students travel via VR to "the Himalayas" to be confronted with the arsenic poisoning of a small village's water supply. Challenged with ethical dilemmas like this, students are encouraged to draw on a variety of virtues: empathy, honesty, critical thinking, inclusivity, perspective taking, creativity, and collaboration. Framing the course around this narrative allows the content to be both intellectually engaging and morally demanding.

Second, universities cannot simply focus on how commercially viable innovation will prove *without also asking* whether those innovations will hurt or help people, both now and in the future. Because it's not difficult to find dramatic examples of what happens when innovation is *not* principled. Take the implosion of Theranos, the biotech company that claimed it could test blood samples with only a couple of drops. Theranos effectively fabricated data and lied to investors, resulting in criminal convictions of a number of senior staff.[6] Or consider innovation around vaping and the way the smokeless tobacco industry grew via direct marketing to *children*.[7] Then, of course, there's the plethora of scandals—the sordid litany of corruption, illegality, and abuse—that have rocked so many industries, from finance to entertainment to politics to religious institutions to higher education. The failure of leadership in our culture owes to a crisis of character. Less obviously, it's impossible to calculate quite how damaging are the unintended consequences resulting from times when the most brilliant innovators in our society turn out to have the least integrity. Therefore, at ASU, our priority is that our research remains rooted in pro-social values (i.e., that we are systematically *principled* in our innovations).

Even before naming "principled innovation" as an organizational value, ethical decision-making was embedded in ASU's culture. David Guston and Erik Fisher, two prominent researchers in ASU's School for the Future of Innovation in Society, helped found the *Journal of Responsible Innovation* in 2014.[8] Similarly, in 2022, William Dabars and Kevin Dwyer argued that ASU has pioneered an approach that institutionalizes "reflexive understandings of societal responsibility within a major public research university."[9] However, making principled innovation our ethos has underlined the importance of our academic community taking responsibility for the innovative projects it pursues.

Third, since public universities serve pluralistic societies, character education must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the various worldviews represented by our wide range of students. In addition, public universities need to empower and enable these students to engage in *civil discourse*. By refusing to adhere to a *single* philosophical or religious worldview, ASU has made room for students to draw on their different backgrounds as they engage with our character education initiatives.[10] Only by remaining flexible in this way have we be able to secure "buy-in" across the university.

For example, ASU's University College, which oversees general education and serves students from varied backgrounds and majors, recently established the Principled Innovation Academy (PIA). Cocurricular and open to all undergraduate students, the PIA includes human-centered problem-solving methods and team pitch competitions. So far, over 750 students have engaged with this program. By working together in teams and reflectively discussing the ethical implications of their solutions, students cultivate courage, creativity, and inclusiveness. Furthermore, as students develop pitches, they identify their own moral values such as honesty, fairness, and empathy. For instance, the winning team from the inaugural cohort created an AI-powered tool that personalizes career recommendations in a way that factors in a student's skills, values, and major.

Universities, in our view, have a responsibility to serve the common good by realizing *all three* of their historic goals: advancing the frontiers of knowledge, preparing students for careers marked by honesty and decency, and setting up young adults to lead lives of meaning and purpose rooted in carefully considered sets of personal and pro-social principles. A lot depends on the ability and willingness of leaders in higher education to reimagine what character formation looks like in their context. Can we identify the most effective ways of adapting our academic cultures, curating our programs, and allocating our resources in order that our student bodies and wider communities can thrive? It's not enough to be at the forefront of innovation, or to excel at career preparation, unless as institutions we *also* insist that flourishing as both human beings and as citizens hinges upon what Martin Luther King Jr. famously termed "the content of [our] character."[11]

Endnotes

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"Moral formation" can sound unacceptably paternalistic and insufferably moralistic. But if virtue has something to do with our flourishing as human beings, if the content of our character is connected to our ability to "make a success of life," then moral formation is what we owe the rising generation.

This landmark volume brings together a series of original and penetrating essays by educators, scholars, leaders, policymakers, and political commentators convinced of the necessity of character in our cultural and political moment.

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