

## Engaging College Students and Cadets in Training Tomorrow's Leaders of Character

Shelby Clark, Boston University  
Scott Seider, Boston University<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In this article, the authors describe the experiences of five cadets and college students serving as camp leaders for the United States Air Force Academy's (USAFA) Leaders of Character Camp (LoCC). Additionally, they describe the work in which three other universities are engaged to adapt the LoCC model to their own university contexts. In so doing, the authors seek to offer insights into how such camp experiences foster college students' leadership and character and to highlight some of the efforts to expand the reach of such experiences across the nation.

Summer camps have long been used in the United States and elsewhere for educational and character-building purposes (Gordon, 2011). Indeed, as far back as 1929, scholars reported that summer camps led to positive behavioral changes in youth (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2006). Likewise, contemporary researchers have characterized high-quality summer camps as "uniquely suited" for positive youth development as a result of their isolation from outside influences, opportunities for physical activities, presence of adults, and exposure to diversity (e.g., Henderson et al., 2007; Thurber et al., 2006, p. 243). Outdoor adventure camps in particular have been associated with growth in campers' character, maturation, and leadership skills.

While summer camps are often associated with younger children, a handful of researchers have found that summer camps can have an important impact on college student development as well. Gass, Garvey, and Sugerma (2003) found that college students who participated in a wilderness orientation program demonstrated positive changes 17 years after participating. Johnson and colleagues (2011) reported that the role of summer camp counselor offered emerging adults important opportunities to "try on" roles and responsibilities that fostered their identity development. Brandt and Arnold (2006) found that college 4-H camp counselors had long-term positive outcomes, "particularly in leadership, citizenship, sense of contribution, and teamwork" (para. 1). Yet, relatively little has been written on summer camp models that are explicitly designed to place university students in the role of character educators.

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<sup>1</sup> Shelby Clark (sclark2@bu.edu) is a doctoral student and Glenn Fellow at Boston University, where her research focuses on the development of intellectual character strengths such as curiosity in adolescents and young adults. Scott Seider (seider@bu.edu) is an associate professor at Boston University and the author of *Character Compass: How Powerful School Culture Can Point Students Toward Success*.

In this article, we describe the experiences of five cadets and college students serving as camp leaders for the United States Air Force Academy's (USAFA) Leaders of Character Camp. Additionally, we describe the work in which three other universities are engaged to adapt the Leaders of Character Camp model to their own university contexts. In so doing, we seek to offer insights into how such camp experiences foster college students' leadership and character and to highlight some of the efforts to expand the reach of such experiences across the nation.

### **Leaders of Character Camp**

Leaders of Character Camp (LoCC) is an outdoor, adventure-based character camp run through the U.S. Air Force Academy's Center for Leadership and Character with funding support from the Character Education Partnership.<sup>2</sup> Having just completed its third summer of operation, LoCC first began in the summer of 2012 with 11 high school students from a diverse set of high schools across Colorado, and expanded to 19 high school students for the summer of 2013 session. The high school students who participate in the Air Force Academy's LoCC are typically active leaders in their high school communities, and they are nominated by their high schools to attend. The *leaders* of the 2013 camp included five Air Force Academy cadets as well as four college students from around the country. The high school students were broken up into pods, mixed by age, gender, and high school; and each pod was led by one of the cadet or college student leaders.

The primary aim of the LoCC is to foster in its adolescent participants the character virtues emphasized at the U.S. Air Force Academy, with the goal that these students will return to their respective high schools and spread the lessons they have learned to their classmates and teammates there. LoCC programming is adventure based, with each day including an activity that focuses on a different USAFA virtue such as trust, awareness, courage, attention to detail, respect, caring for others, duty/excellence, and commitment. During the summer of 2013, for example, campers worked on building trust with one another through their participation in a ropes course, and they focused on building awareness and courage during a white water rafting excursion. The pods debrief after each activity, and the students also engage in individual coaching sessions with their leaders. This individual coaching time—as well as assigned journaling—give the students structured opportunities to reflect upon the character virtues throughout the duration of the camp session. At the end of each LoCC session, leaders and students participate together in a commitment hike where each camper and leader chooses a specific virtue that they pledge to work on in the future.

### **Impact on the College and Cadet Leaders**

Mark Hyatt, former CEP President and CEO, asserted that “The character development journey does not end with a high school diploma” (“Leaders of Character Camp,” 2012, para. 1). While the initial aim of LoCC was to launch a mentoring and leadership training program for high school students, the camp has always had a dual purpose in that the cadets and college leaders also benefit from their experiences as leaders of the camp. Upon first establishing the camp, Hyatt noted that the camp would “also demonstrate first-hand to the college students how their position as role models requires them to continuously develop and refine their own core values” (“Leaders of Character Camp,” 2012, para. 3). Of the five leaders we spoke with

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<sup>2</sup> This article's second author is a member of the Character Education Partnership's Education Advisory Council.

regarding their experiences with LoCC, all agreed that not only was LoCC a growth experience for the high school students, but that it also affected and strengthened their own character development.

Many of the camp leaders felt that working at LoCC allowed them to develop their own leadership skills. USAFA cadet John (personal communication, November 19, 2013) noted<sup>3</sup>

At the AFA we preach a lot about being a person of good character and being a good leader. The cool part about Character Camp is that I had to teach those virtues; I had to actually sit down. I've never actually broken down those virtues and really defined them, [so] that was a big moment for me when we were preparing for camp.

He further noted that this analysis of what the character virtues at USAFA mean to him, "further defined my ability to lead or think about what I was doing as a leader." Fellow cadet Tara (personal communication, November 22, 2013) added

[LoCC] made me improve on what I need to focus on as a leader. It helped me back up so that I can see how to have people work well for you. [It] helped me talk to other people in my own squadron and get them better developed as a leader as well.

Justin, a college student at Hampden-Sydney College, also spoke about his improvement as a leader (personal communication, November 22, 2013). He stated that the camp "wasn't just for the campers, we were challenged as well to pick a virtue and to work on it throughout the rest of our lives. [The camp] allowed me to become a better leader."

Some of the leaders also spoke about how their role as a leader at the camp helped them to think beyond their own needs. Lindsey, a student at DeSales University in Pennsylvania, explained that working as a leader helped her to think more about caring for others (personal communication, November 15, 2013). She stated

[the] biggest change that it brought about in me was emphasis on caring for others, really having to set myself aside and help the younger kids out with figuring out the virtues was very productive for me. It reminded me to step back from myself and not be selfish.

Cadet Tara also explained that the camp "helps you think about your priorities, what's more important? To be selfish or can I give that time to someone else to help them?"

Perhaps most importantly, all of the college students and cadets felt that there were ways in which they could bring the skills they taught at LoCC back to their daily lives. Justin and Lindsey both noted that they were eager to implement some of the activities and virtues they focused on at the camp into their work as resident advisors at their colleges. Similarly, Adam, a senior at Mt. St. Joseph College in Cincinnati, noted that he was able to bring back activities he learned at LoCC and immediately apply them to his work as an athletic team leader at his college (personal communication, November 22, 2013). Adam explained that it was the experiential-based approach of the camp that really forced him to take note of the virtues and how they apply to daily life:

You hear about certain things like trust and paying attention in your everyday life and it goes in one ear and out the other, you think it's automatic. Once you do extreme circumstances, every time trust

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<sup>3</sup> All college students and cadets in this article are referred to by pseudonyms.

comes up or commitment, whether it be homework or sports, you think back to that time, where you were almost in danger, you think back and know that you can get through it and apply what we learned at camp to your everyday life.

All of the leaders spoke positively of the experience, noting the friendships they had built and the lessons they had learned. Adam described his experience as “life changing,” and John noted, “I thought it was a really great experience. I told all my friends that they should try and apply and get involved with it because it was an awesome experience.”

### **Bringing LoCC to Other Universities**

While LoCC has operated for the past 3 years solely at the Air Force Academy and focused primarily on Colorado-based high school students, Character Education Partnership, and the Air Force Academy originally joined forces in hopes that LoCCs would spread to other colleges and universities across the United States. To this end, four college students from universities across the United States were included as leaders during the summer of 2013 so that they could learn about the LoCC culture and curriculum, and then bring this curriculum back to their respective undergraduate institutions. All of the interviewed cadet and college leaders expressed their belief that LoCC could be expanded across the nation into different colleges and universities, although they noted that the adventure-based curriculum might need to be adjusted based on a college’s varying facilities. Adam said, “I definitely think it’s important for us to span out and go to different spaces so eventually our whole country could live by the traits and the virtues that we taught [at LoCC].” Justin stated that the LoCC model “could be useful at any level with any person, if the person wants to change, to work on their character.” He argued that it could be implemented with elementary, middle school, and college students, as well as adults.

At Mount St. Joseph College, a small Catholic college in Cincinnati, Ohio, President Tony Aretz (personal communication, February 7, 2014) commented that the college aspires to establish a program similar to LoCC targeted at more at-risk local high school students. Mount St. Joseph college students would serve as the leaders of the camp, headed by Adam, the senior who attended the USAFA camp in 2013. Currently, the aim is for the camp to be a 1-day experience at an area ropes course focused on developing confidence and trust. President Aretz explained that the values Mount St. Joseph would focus on would be similar to those of USAFA, but would resonate with the college’s mission as a Catholic institution. One goal for the camp would be to try to offer local high school students, particularly young men from historically underrepresented groups, the tools they need to succeed in college. Speaking to this goal, President Aretz explained: “We’ve failed our students in the character development we do in our [K-12] school system. Leadership is character. . . . If we don’t have leaders of character, we’re doomed.” Through this camp experience, he hopes to support students in developing the “confidence and leadership skills to succeed in college.” Additionally, President Aretz sees a Mount St. Joseph-style LoCC as a potential recruitment tool aimed at increasing the diversity of the Mount St. Joseph student body.

At Hampden-Sydney College, an all-male institution in Virginia, the goal is to use the LoCC model, as well as the NC State General Hugh Shelton Leadership Center camp model, to start a character camp for high school students as early as the summer of 2015. LTC (retired) Rucker Snead (personal communication, February 9, 2014), the director of Hampden-Sydney’s Wilson Center for Leadership in the Public Interest, noted that forming “good men and good citizens in an atmosphere of sound learning” is a core part of Hampden-Sydney’s mission. Additionally, the Wilson Center already engages in significant outreach to

local high schools. Establishing an LoCC at Hampden-Sydney, then, would be a natural addition to such outreach. One goal of such a camp at Hampden-Sydney would be recruitment—to get local high school students onto the Hampden-Sydney campus to learn more about what the college has to offer. Additionally, Snead explained that Hampden-Sydney would “put a Hampden-Sydney spin” on the LoCC model. In keeping with the school’s single sex tradition, the camp would target disadvantaged male students in the Virginia area, and the focus would be on leadership and character, with some classroom as well as adventure-based experiences.

Finally, at DeSales University, a Catholic University in Pennsylvania, character is already an explicit and substantial dimension of the undergraduate experience. DeSales features a first year experience program called “Character U” through which the entire first-year class is divided into teams of 8–10 students, with each team led by an upperclassmen mentor. The students attend weekly team meetings in order to engage with a curriculum built around the Salesian virtues of perseverance, cooperation, patience, trust, love, forgiveness, and hope. Specifically, these team meetings typically focus on a particular moral dilemma (e.g., a student finds out his/her roommate is cheating on a test), and then students reflect together upon how to bring their character strengths to bear on the dilemma. Approximately 8% of these first-year students choose to go on to complete a certificate in character and leadership, which means being in good academic standing, completing Character U, serving in a leadership role on campus, completing 40 hours of community service, and taking a course in four different areas pertaining to character.

Dr. Gregg Amore (personal communication, February 14, 2014), DeSales’s associate dean of students for student development, noted, “What [we] really want to do is create a school-wide culture focused on character.” Amore said that they are still exploring the idea of their own LoCC-like camp focused on local high schools affiliated with the university, arguing that this might be a way to replicate their Character U model at the secondary level. Lindsey, a DeSales student who attended LoCC as a leader in 2013, explained that the DeSales version of LoCC might include offering the camp as an experience for first-year students as a capstone to their first year experience in the Character U program. She noted that they would use Salesian virtues in their camp rather than the ones focused on at LoCC, but stated that these two sets of virtues “coordinate and mesh really well.” Similar to a number of the profiled universities, the primary challenge to getting LoCC up and running is identifying and securing the necessary funding for the endeavor.

## Conclusion

While a longstanding body of scholarship has found summer camps, particularly outdoor adventure camps, to have positive effects on youth development, there is relatively little scholarship that has (a) focused on the effects of these experiences on college student leaders and (b) offered profiles of different models that seek to offer these experiences to college students. Here, we have sought to report on a particular model—the U.S Air Force Academy’s Leader of Character Camp—as well as the ways in which various colleges and universities across the United States are seeking to adapt the model to suit their own particular ethos and student body.

Student leaders from across these campuses who have participated in the LoCC report that the camp succeeded in its dual goals of teaching character to the high school students, but also making the college students and cadets reflect upon their own character strengths and virtues. Each leader maintained that the camp had positively affected their character development in some way—whether by expanding their leadership skills, teaching them to care for others, or providing them with ways to apply their knowledge of

character in the “real world.” We are hopeful that their accounts—in conjunction with those of administrators, faculty, and students affairs professionals at these institutions—may provide inspiration and guidance to those interested in implementing similar programs at their own colleges and universities.

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