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College Access, Student Success, and the *New* Character Education

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Abstract

Over the past several years, there has been a resurgence of interest in—and reconceptualizing of—character education in primary and secondary schools across the United States. An important question, then, is how this new emphasis on character development at the K-12 level impacts the work of university faculty and student affairs professionals. Are graduates of these primary and secondary schools with an intensive character focus arriving at their respective universities with heightened levels of grit and social intelligence? Are such qualities facilitating their ability to thrive at the postsecondary level? Are university faculty and staff coordinating with their K-12 counterparts to support the continued development of these qualities in newly matriculated students? The authors pose these questions in interviews with four different university stakeholders who can speak to the effects at the university level of the *new* character education emphasis in many American primary and secondary schools.

Character education played an integral role in the original vision of both K-12 and postsecondary education in the United States. At the K-12 level, Thomas Jefferson cited the development of children's character as a key motivation for the establishment of public schools in the United States (McClellan, 1999). John and Elizabeth Phillips founded New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy in 1781 to promote both the "minds and morals of the youth under their charge" (Phillips Exeter, 1991). Horace Mann, one of the founding fathers of universal public education, argued that public schools could instill in unruly children the values such as respect and self-discipline necessary for a productive adulthood (McClellan, 1999). However, the standards-based education movement ushered in by *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980s, and further codified by *No Child Left Behind* in 2001, narrowed the attention of most American primary and secondary schools

to students' academic achievement in mathematics and literacy (Seider, 2012). As a result, the final decade of the 20th century and opening decade of the 21st saw relatively little focus on character development in K-12 public schools.

A Focus on Performance Character

Over the past several years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in—and reconceptualizing of—character education at the K-12 level that holds important implications for university faculty and staff. As described by journalist Paul Tough (2012) in his best-selling book *How Children Succeed*, a number of elite independent schools such as Riverdale Country Day in New York City and urban charter school networks such as the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which operates 141 schools serving 40,000 students in 20 states, began to look beyond the question of how to support their students in developing the academic skills necessary to get *into* college and to consider the qualities their students needed to possess in order to make it *through* college.[2] This questioning was sparked by educators in both elite independent and urban public schools observing that academic preparedness did not necessarily predict which of their alumni thrived in a university setting. Rather, they, and a number of researchers with whom they formed collaborations, began to identify particular character strengths that are predictive of students' future success (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005, 2006; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

For the KIPP charter school network, these revelations about the role of character in predicting student success led the network to dedicate significant time and resources to students' character development. Specifically, for the past several years, KIPP faculty and school leaders across the United States have focused their character education efforts on fostering students' grit, zest, self-control, optimism, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity. These are the character strengths that KIPP's leadership team and research partners assert can play the most significant role in supporting their students' success in college and beyond.

What is notable about this character focus at KIPP—and increasingly, other school systems as well—is that the featured character strengths are not focused on moral qualities such as empathy or integrity, or even civic qualities such as social responsibility or openness to multiple perspectives. Rather, scholars refer to character strengths such as grit and zest as *performance character strengths:* the qualities that an individual draws upon in achieving his or her potential in a given endeavor, whether that endeavor is academic, athletic, artistic, etc. As Tough (2012) noted, "Strengths like zest, optimism, social intelligence and curiosity are not particularly heroic; they make you think of Steve Jobs or Bill Clinton more than Martin Luther King Jr. or Gandhi" (p. 79).

Having offered this brief description of the *new* character education taking place in K-12 education, a key question becomes how this character focus in primary and secondary schools impacts the work of university faculty and student affairs professionals. Are graduates of schools such as KIPP and Riverdale Country Day arriving at their respective universities with heightened levels of grit and social intelligence that facilitate their ability to thrive at the postsecondary level? Are university faculty and staff explicitly coordinating with K-12 educators to support the continued development of these character strengths in newly matriculated students? Is such coordination paying off? Here, we offer perspectives on these questions from the four different stakeholders we interviewed for this article and who can speak to the effects *on the university* of this new character education emphasis in American primary and secondary schools.

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[2] For the purposes of full disclosure, the second author's wife is a board member of KIPP Massachusetts.

The University and Character Education

One important question is whether the focus on performance character strengths such as grit by K-12 educators pays off at the university level. In a 2013 study of African American college students attending predominantly White institutions, Terrell L. Strayhorn reported on a positive relationship between grit and college student achievement. Specifically, he found that "grit, alone, added incremental predictive validity over and beyond traditional measures of academic success such as high school grade point average and American College Test scores" (p. 6). In explaining these findings in a personal interview, Strayhorn speculated that high levels of grit mean African American collegians are more successful in contending with stressors—such as micro-aggressions, prejudice, and stereotype threat—which have been well documented in the experiences of Students of Color attending predominantly White institutions (T. Strayhorn, personal communication, July 3, 2013).

Daniel Porterfield, president of Franklin & Marshall College (F&M), also explained in a personal interview that performance character strengths such as grit and perseverance have an important role to play in the success of college students, and particularly first-generation college students (D. Porterfield, personal communication, July 16, 2013). Toward this end, in seeking talented students from the American mosaic, F&M forged partnerships with urban school networks that explicitly focus on their students' character development such as KIPP, Achievement First (which operates 22 charter schools in New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island), and Cristo Rey (which operates 25 Catholic schools in 17 states). While many higher education professionals might be surprised to hear that a small liberal arts college such as F&M is one of the institutions leading the charge on recruiting students from these urban school networks, Porterfield explained that the ethos of a small liberal arts college "focused on rigorous academics alongside high-touch support" is a natural continuation of the educational experiences that students encounter in these urban "change-making educational entities" (D. Porterfield, personal communication, July 16, 2013). Because of this perceived alignment, F&M's admissions office aspires to conduct interviews with every applicant, with the explicit goal of identifying candidates who demonstrate high levels of grit, perseverance, and other performance character strengths that F&M faculty and staff have found to correlate with student success.

The efforts of Strayhorn and Porterfield reinforce a growing body of scholarship that suggests colleges and universities would be well served to seek out prospective students demonstrating high levels of performance character strengths such as grit and self-discipline. A different question is whether universities can play a role in nurturing these qualities in matriculated students. Strayhorn argued that the answer to this question is yes, and he proposed programming for incoming college students to teach time management, goal-setting, and how to sustain effort over long periods of time (T. Strayhorn, personal communication, July 3, 2013). He also asserts that character strengths such as grit are highly transferrable. In other words, the effects of such character development programming could "translate into multiple domains. . . . Success in A leads to trying B; and once you have succeeded in C, before you know it, by the time you get to F you feel a strong sense of accomplishment" (T. Strayhorn, personal communication, July 3, 2013).

Porterfield claimed that these performance character strengths can be cultivated and nurtured in students as well. He recently created a new role at F&M dedicated to the planning and analysis of student outcomes and tapped Donnell Butler, a sociologist and F&M graduate, to direct this effort as a senior associate dean. According to Porterfield, one of Butler's primary roles is to help the college develop programming that can nurture and build upon the performance character foundation with which newly matriculated students, and particularly first-generation college students, have arrived at F&M (D. Porterfield, personal communication, July 16, 2013). In explaining this strategic decision, Porterfield hypothesized that one reason

for the lower graduation rates nationally among first-generation and high-risk students is the narrow focus at many universities upon students' academic development. In contrast, Porterfield explained that, to ignore the social, psychological, and character components of education risks

> failing to teach students how to leverage their character strengths for college success and could, in some circumstances, fail to help students address longer-term developmental issues, like mental illness, that they may have been able to subordinate in high school. (D. Porterfield, personal communication, July 16, 2013)

The programming F&M is exploring ranges from offering residential summer institutes for high-achieving high school students that increase their comfort and familiarity with college-level work to connecting incoming first-year students with upperclassmen mentors from similar cultural backgrounds (and paying those upperclassmen to serve as mentors) to creating work-study positions that will be meaningful and skill-building rather than merely a source of income. Porterfield explained that F&M is deliberately piloting numerous "micro-interventions" rather than a larger one-size-fits-all intervention because different students will benefit from different types of support (D. Porterfield, personal communication, July 16, 2013). He noted that a small liberal arts college such as F&M—with its focus on high-touch support—can develop "micro" or "tailored" interventions that support the profiles of individual students with whom they are working (D. Porterfield, personal communication, July 16, 2013). However, the goal underlying all of these different interventions is for F&M to "provide the most explicitly and welcoming environment" possible for all incoming students—and, in particular, to first-generation college students and students from nondominant racial and ethnic groups who, as research shows, can often feel out of place at predominantly White universities (D. Porterfield, personal communication, July 16, 2013).

Strayhorn's work on grit among African American collegians also comes from a similar underlying goal. His prior scholarship focused on the relationship between success in college and feeling a sense of belonging on a college or university campus. Strayhorn explained that for African American college students (or students from other nondominant racial and ethnic groups) at a predominantly White university, "Vulnerability to stereotypes can undermine a student's sense of belonging" (T. Strayhorn, personal communication, July 3, 2013). However, Strayhorn added that there is a direct relationship between belonging and grit in that "Students who persist in the face of those negative stereotypes . . . and who exercise agency even in those spaces tend to be very gritty" (T. Strayhorn, personal communication, July 3, 2013). Certainly, there is more work to be done in exploring this relationship between belonging and grit. Do students with high levels of grit feel a greater sense of belonging on a university campus? Or do students with a greater sense of belonging find it easier to be gritty? Strayhorn speculated the relationship may, in fact, be a reciprocal one in which belonging reinforces grit, and vice-versa (T. Strayhorn, personal communication, July 3, 2013).

Two additional stakeholders focused on this relationship between belonging and grit are the Posse Foundation and KIPP Through College.[3] The Posse Foundation, founded in 1989 by Deborah Bial, sends high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds to competitive universities in cohorts (or "posses") of ten. Charles Edel, a Posse NY board member, explained in a personal interview that the "idea behind Posse is that the students become a self-supporting network" (C. Edel, personal communication, July 2, 2013). Posse scholars are selected in the winter of their senior year of high school through a rigorous admissions process that focuses not only on their academic record but also on their possession of leadership and

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[3] For the purposes of full disclosure, the Posse NY board member interviewed for this article is a colleague of the first author.

performance character strengths that will strengthen their likelihood of success in college. Once admitted to the program, Posse scholars meet weekly for the remainder of their senior year in order to develop into a cohesive unit. When they arrive on campus, each Posse is assigned a faculty advisor. Throughout their college experience, the Posse meets regularly with their faculty advisor, as a cohort, as well as with the foundation's own staff. The theory of change is that increasing students' sense of belonging and support will strengthen their ability to persevere in the face of the stressors and challenges that Strayhorn characterized as often accompanying the experience of students from nondominant backgrounds on a university campus (T. Strayhorn, personal communication, July 3, 2013).

KIPP Through College was established in 2011 as a result of an extensive self-study undertaken by the KIPP Charter School network on the college graduation rates of its alumni. This self-study revealed that 33% of KIPP alumni were graduating from college, a figure that is four times the national average for low-income students, but well short of KIPP's goal of 75% college completion (KIPP, 2011). With an eye toward accomplishing this goal, KIPP reaffirmed its commitment to character development at the K-12 level and established a KIPP Through College program aimed at providing students with both financial and emotional support throughout their college years. According to Alexis Rosado, Massachusetts KIPP Through College director, the program seeks to strengthen students' sense of belonging and grit through programming that includes organizing gatherings for alumni during school holidays, scheduling individual check-ins with college-going alumni throughout the academic year, and in these check-ins explicitly building upon the character foundation that these students developed during their K-12 years at KIPP Schools (A. Rosado, personal communication, June 21, 2013). Similar to the theory of change guiding the Posse Foundation and scholarship reported on by Strayhorn, KIPP Through College posits a reciprocal relationship between grit and sense of belonging, and that both have a direct impact upon college success.

Conclusion

On one hand, character education has been a part of the American primary, secondary, and postsecondary educational system since its founding. However, the intensive focus on performance character strengths at the K-12 level as a tool for supporting students' progression to *and through* college is a relatively new one. Though there is still much to be learned about the relationship between college completion and qualities such as grit and belonging, as well as the ability of particular interventions to nurture such qualities, these initial efforts suggest that working together stakeholders from K-12 education, university settings, and the nonprofit sphere could support the college access and completion of literally tens of thousands of young people who may currently conceive of college as "not for them." In their work on fostering college access and success, Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) noted that "The majority of today's jobs require advanced skills and credentials, typically acquired through higher education, and that all young people therefore deserve the opportunity to explore college as an option" (p. 15). Coordinated character development programming at both the K-12 and postsecondary level has an important role to play in bringing about such opportunities.

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