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Character and the modern university

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Quad 136

Character and the Modern University

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Character and the Modern University



David Brooks has long been interested in the issue of character, as his recent book, *The Road to Character*, his *New York Times* columns and various public presentations ([here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)) reveal. In particular, Brooks, who has taught as an adjunct at Yale, is interested in the role colleges and universities play in forming the character of their students.

In a [recent column](#), Brooks returns to this theme, seemingly more optimistic about how well colleges and universities are doing in the matter of character development. Brooks writes that for “many decades colleges narrowed down to focus on professional academic disciplines, but now there are a series of forces leading them to widen out so that they leave a mark on the full human being.” He argues that many institutions are trying “to cultivate the whole student: the emotional, spiritual and moral sides and not just the intellectual.”

He offers four ways that 21st-century universities might improve or strengthen their attempts to form character:

1. **Foster transcendent experiences.** Brooks suggests that by regular exposure to beauty “there’s a good chance something transcendent and imagination-altering will happen.”
2. **Study what you love.** Brooks believes that encouraging students to study what they love and find new loves, universities will help students come to understand what things are truly important to them, they will begin to know their “fundamental” selves.
3. **Apply the humanities to life.** Great art and literature can teach us much about how to live our lives. Brooks urges professors to not hesitate to encourage learning from and applying such sources to life’s dilemmas.
4. **Explore moral options.** Brooks notes that there are many moral frameworks to build an ethical life around. He urges universities to explicitly present these different “moral ecologies,” as he calls them, and let students decide how they apply in their lives.

In the end, however, Brooks’s suggestions are pretty low calorie intellectual fare for students seeking meaning for their lives and a strong moral compass to live by.

Beauty is surely important and can give additional meaning to life, but it



is not clear how the Impressionists or even the Sistine Chapel will provide much moral direction. One can love subjects that are amoral or even immoral. Passionate engagement with an academic discipline, which is certainly a desirable outcome of a great liberal arts education, is no guarantee of furthering a search for meaning. What can mathematics teach students about character? The natural or social sciences rarely make, and often actively avoid, moral claims. Even the humanities, which arguably have historically explored issues of meaning and values, have largely, in the post-modern academy, become amoral, questioning the existence of “truth” and hesitating to make judgments on human choices.

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Exploring various moral options seems, at first glance, to offer a bit more to students. Here Brooks is making an appropriate call to avoid the kind of moral relativism, the “I’m OK, you’re OK” attitudes that can be prevalent on college campuses. But as examples of different moral options Brooks offers the Greek tradition, which focuses on honor, or the scientific tradition, focusing on reason. To offer these as part of the legitimate range of moral options seems decidedly unhelpful to millennials. Do the Greeks really have much to say about female genital mutilation or bride burning? Isn’t one of the ethical challenges facing students a world in which **science is offering challenges** that ethics has not yet grappled with? How does the scientific method help us think about the ethics of cloning or sex selection?

Brooks comes up short for the students he clearly cares about, ultimately stymied by the secular nature of most institutions of higher education.

Brooks is working very hard to find ways to engage faculty, staff and students at secular institutions, places that can often be uncomfortable with making value judgments, but he’s dancing around the issue. As he states the challenge, “The trick is to find a way to talk about moral and spiritual things while respecting diversity,” but in the final analysis, diversity wins because he cannot bring himself to call for universities to seriously engage with religious traditions. Surely the great moral frameworks in the world start, though they may not end, with religious traditions. It may be necessary to be attentive to the sensibilities of secular humanists on campus, but the Greeks can only take you so far, and to suggest that reason and logic alone could be a sufficient moral framework will leave most students cold and likely morally confused.

Brooks appropriately begins his piece by noting that most American universities were “founded as religious institutions, explicitly designed to cultivate their students’ spiritual and moral natures.” The motivations of the founders of our earliest educational institutions can provide us with all the guidance we need. If current educational institutions are truly interested in character and moral development, they need to provide opportunities to study and engage with religious traditions. Full stop.

Brooks writes, “Colleges can insist that students at least become familiar with these different moral ecologies. Then it’s up to the students to figure out which one or which combination is best to live by.” The second sentence is certainly unobjectionable, but the first pulls its punch. Colleges that care about their students’ character and search for meaning should ignite this exploration by requiring that students be exposed to the moral frameworks offered by the world’s great religions.

Students want and deserve direct approaches to their moral questions and religious traditions offer an essential starting point.

College should obviously not be character Boot Camp or some attempt to indoctrinate students with a particular ethical framework. Character



development is only one of the many important things going on in a young person's undergraduate experience. Character also forms over a lifetime, with parents and home communities playing a huge role in the early years, and moral development continues and becomes more nuanced throughout one's life. But, four years of college can and should be an important part of character formation as it is a time when students are free from many external pressures and responsibilities and are at a time in their life when they are seeking to more fully understand themselves and their world and to find deep and lasting meaning for their lives. The undergraduate experience at every institution can provide support and guidance in the search for meaning,

but religiously affiliated institutions often have a special advantage over their secular counterparts as they have a moral and theological intellectual tradition to serve as a starting point for that conversation and search. Secular institutions don't have to change their nature to support their students' search for meaning. They simply have to take religion seriously as part of a liberal arts education.

David Brooks, next time you're in Minnesota, stop by St. Joseph and Collegeville. We'd love to talk to you about character development and the Benedictine tradition.

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