

**Building Character and Courage: Using the VIA Character Strengths assessment and journaling to develop character development in an undergraduate business elective**

**Abstract**

Developing character in our young people has become an urgent and perhaps tricky business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Kuh and Umbach (2004) argue that few studies emphasize the behavior that shapes or is related to character development. This session offers participants an opportunity to learn about one instructor's efforts to promote character development among undergraduate business students as it relates to interpersonal relationships and leadership behavior. Using journaling assignments that include practice, reflection and feedback, students practice and experiment with activities that explore and strengthen the character strengths defined in the VIA Character Survey ([www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)). Active exchange of others' experiences with character development will be encouraged.

Keywords: character, leadership, VIA Character Survey

**Introduction**

This paper describes a pedagogical approach that is intended to develop a student's character that aligns with values-based leadership. Values-based leadership is rooted in a student's identity and purpose, or in other words who they are and what they stand for (Kraemer, 2011). This approach or activity engages students in identifying their character strengths, practicing these strengths as they engage in real-world experiences outside the classroom, reflection in the form of journaling, and feedback from the instructor and peers. The series of practice, journaling and feedback activities help build a student's confidence and courage to act with more character - or positive values - when faced with difficult and ethically challenging situations.

**Character and Student Leadership Development**

Colleges were once among the primary institutions with the goal to develop the values, character and intellect of young people (Rudolph, 1990). As institutions of higher education expanded, they grew more secular although most colleges still purport to provide students opportunities to discover, evaluate and refine their character (Kuh & Umbach, 2004). Many student leadership development courses and programs often include topics, exercises and assessments to identify values, build character, or develop an ethical perspective with regard to values-based leadership (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bennis, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2014; Haber & Komives, 2009). Faculty can assess student's leadership capacity and growth by reviewing leadership portfolios, journals, general tests and quizzes on knowledge during the course or program (Owen, 2011; Roberts, 2007). The use of reflective journaling in the undergraduate elective in

interpersonal skill building and leadership development promotes both character growth and the practice of leadership behaviors.

### **VIA Character Survey**

Values have been defined in a variety of ways including: “A value is a conception, explicit or implicit... of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (Kiuckhohn, 1951); “A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, 1979); and “...as normative beliefs about proper standards of conduct and preferred or desired results” (Nystrom, 1990). While definitions differ, there appears to be general agreement that values influence behavior. An objective of the undergraduate elective is around building self-awareness of one’s values in order to behave in an ethical manner - to do the right thing and make a positive contribute to an organization as well as society.

Ethical behavior is driven by our values. Values, as enduring beliefs, influence modes of behavior, means as well as ends of action (Kiuckhohn, 1951) and provide normative guidelines for appropriate standards of conduct and desired results (Nystrom, 1990). To further the self-awareness and growth of values and ethical behavior, there must be conceptual and empirical tools to measure and develop character strengths. The VIA Character Survey assessment developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) is a measure of values in the form of character strengths that provides a vocabulary for character discussion, reflection and growth. The use of the assessments provides a foundation for initial awareness of what students’ natural talents may be and how to develop the competence to build confidence, character and courage to enact their leadership.

### **Journal Assignments**

Student leadership development is most effective when students learn over time, operationalize through practice, and receive feedback and support (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Individualized program is more effective at developing character and commitment than a more generalized approach (Park & Peterson, 2009). Park and Peterson (2008, 2009) also propose that character development programs need to teach specific activities of strengths and encourage students to keep using them in their daily lives to promote confidence. Thus students can select the journal prompts that are most relevant to their own experiences and are appealing to their personal interests and goals.

Students are expected to submit 20 journal entries over the course of a 16-week seminar selecting from an evolving list of approximately 35 prompts posted on the course LMS. There are three required entries that include the following: (1) a reflection on a team-based escape room experiential activity conducted in Week 1 of the semester (pre-VIA survey); (2) a reflective evaluation of the student’s results of the VIA Character Strengths assessment in Week 3; and (3) a reflective evaluation of a week’s activities of targeting 1-5 specific character strengths to practice and develop. About half of the journal entry

choices include integrating character strengths, interpersonal skills and leadership activities. Students also include discussion of their experience developing their character strengths in a final reflection paper which focuses primarily on a semester long team service project.

### **MOBTS Session Description**

After briefly presenting my experience with this pedagogical approach (20-25 minutes), I expect to facilitate an interactive discussion with like-minded colleagues who have also utilized the VIA Character Survey or other character building exercises in their courses or programs. It is the goal of this 60 minute discussion to share best practices as well as questions and challenges of using values-based self assessments to promote self-awareness, character growth and leadership capacity in students. I will distribute or make available copies of journal prompts from the course and will invite others to share as well. Since the effectiveness of this learning process has been anecdotal thus far (at USC Marshall), there is the opportunity to discuss and create effective assessment tools based on our discussion and debate. I intend to assess the impact of the journaling in the Spring 2019 elective and hope to provide results in the form of an article for one of the MOBTS journals.

### **Conference Track Theme**

Character and courage are required to initiate and manage positive change. The exercise described here helps students not only become more aware of their own character strengths but also further develop and refine them in order to truly become their best selves. As such, students can develop as value-based leaders who become agents for positive change.

### **References**

Avolio, B. J., & Bass, B. M. (1995). Individual consideration viewed at multiple levels of analysis: A multi-level framework for examining the diffusion of transformational leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(2), 199–218.

Bennis, W. G. (2009). *On becoming a leader*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Dugan, J. P., & Komives, S. R. (2007). *Developing leadership capacity in college students: Findings from a national study. A report from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership*. College Park, MD: National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs.

Haber, P., & Komives, S. R. (2009). Predicting the individual values of the social change model of leadership development: The role of college students' leadership and involvement experiences. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 7(3), 133-166.

Kluckhohn, C. (1951). *Values and value-orientations in the theory of action: An exploration in definition and classification*. In T. Parsons and E. W. Shils (eds.), *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2014). *The student leadership challenge: Five practices for becoming an exemplary leader*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Kraemer, H. M. (2011). *From values to action: The four principles of values-based leadership*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Kuh, G. D., & Umbach, P. D. (2004). College and character: Insights from the national survey of student engagement. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2004(122), 37-54.

Nystrom, P. C. (1990). Differences in moral values between corporations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 9(12), 971-979.

Owen, J. (2011). Program design: Assessment and evaluation. In S. R. Komives, J. P. Dugan, J. E. Owen, C. Slack, & W. Wagner (Eds.), *The handbook for student leadership development* (pp. 177–202). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2008). Positive psychology and character strengths: Application to strengths-based school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 12, 85-92.

Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2009). Character strengths: Research and practice. *Journal of college and character*, 10(4).

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press/Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2006). The values in action (VIA) classification of strengths. *A life worth living: Contributions to positive psychology*, 29-48.

Roberts, D. C. (2007). *Deeper learning in leadership: Helping college students find the potential within*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Rokeach, M. (1979). From individual to institutional values: With special reference to the values of science. *Understanding human values*, 47, 70.

Rudolph, F. *The American College and University: A History*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.