

An Examination of the Effectiveness of a Collegiate Character Education Program

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Abstract

In this cross-sectional study of a Character Development program, the Defining Issues Test II was administered to 600 college students to measure moral reasoning, 3% of the seniors were interviewed, along with examining grades and disciplinary referrals. Evidence revealed that a comprehensive character development program has a positive effect on moral reasoning development, academic achievement, and behavior of college students.

Recently the teaching of moral development in schools has become as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic (Benninga & Wynne, 1998). As Joseph and Efron (2005) pointed out, “the moral work of character education rests on the conviction that schooling can shape the behavior of young people” (p.525). The tragic murders at Columbine High School further underscored what educators have long ago recognized, that schools are not adequately serving the moral development needs of society (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999). Currently, there is a character education movement devoted mostly to elementary and secondary schools. Noticeably missing is the focus on character on college campuses (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Joseph & Efron, 2005).

There is a myriad of reasons why moral development is considered necessary at the collegiate level. The most glaring reason for the need has to do with the state of society in general. Lickona (1998) attributed the groundswell of interest in character education to three general areas: the decline of the family; troubling trends in youth

character; a recovery of shared, objectively important ethical values. In fact, moral principles are the foundation of all democratic principles, including the popular subjects of tolerance and respect for others, as well as impartiality and concern for both the rights of the individual and the welfare of the group (Colby, 2003). Research has indicated that there is a potential for tremendous moral growth during the collegiate years (Rest, 1994). If colleges and universities are to enhance moral development, it is essential to identify what types of programs, if any, are effective. Program evaluation is important in order to determine if goals are being met or if changes need to be made. Patton (1997) emphasized “summative evaluations judge the overall effectiveness of a program and are particularly important in making decisions about continuing or terminating an experimental program or demonstration project” (p. 67). Although there have been a significant number of studies on character education in elementary and secondary school settings, there have been few significant studies that have examined the effectiveness of moral development programs at the collegiate level. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a comprehensive character education program at a small Liberal Arts Christian College with a strong character education emphasis on moral reasoning ability, moral behavior, and academic achievement. The research questions for this study are as follows: 1) Are there differences in the moral development of college students based upon number of years of involvement in a comprehensive character education program? 2) Does involvement in a character education program have an effect on student discipline at the collegiate level? 3) Does involvement in a character education program have an effect on academic achievement at the collegiate level?

### Conceptual Underpinnings

For many years there has been controversy about defining what is meant by character education and moral development. Nucci (2002) postulated that they are closely related and dependent on one another when he noted, “A person of good character is someone who attends to the moral implications of actions and acts in accordance with what is moral in all but the most extreme circumstances” (p. 138).

Because character is complex, moral education is also complex and multifaceted (Nucci, 2002). Components of a moral education program may be the periodic classroom discussion of moral problems or the experience of having to collectively solve real problems in the classroom, school or community. Promoting moral values relies more heavily on role modeling and reinforcement as well as guided introspection. The specific aim of moral education may be to increase the ability to reason about right and wrong, and increase the motivation to do pro-social work or engage in pro-social behaviors, and increase in knowledge about right and wrong. Or it may focus on a combination of these and other related aims (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999).

Kohlberg (1981) formulated a six-stage theory to describe moral judgment development from preadolescence through adulthood. Kohlberg (1981) viewed the six stages as forming an invariant developmental sequence in which attainment of an advanced stage is dependent on the attainment of each of the preceding stages. The assumption was that a more advanced stage is not simply an addition to a less advanced stage, but represents a reorganization of a less advanced level.

Turiel (1983) examined Kohlberg’s claim that an individual must move through these levels in order. He hypothesized that the group exposed to one stage above would

make the highest gain and the group exposed to one stage below would resist that reasoning and remain in their current stage. Turiel's findings confirmed both hypotheses. Rest (1994) then supported the claim that the stages are hierarchically related. A new stage is a transformation of elements of the old along with new elements into a new emergent structure. Much of the research completed in the area of moral development particularly at the collegiate level has used either Kohlberg's *Moral Judgment Interview* or Rest and Narvaez's (1998) *Defining Issues Test* (DIT). Both of these instruments focused on principled moral reasoning (Getz, 1984). The DIT is more widely used because it lacks many of the problems of the *Moral Judgment Interview* with regard to ease of administration particularly with large sample sizes (Emler, 1996).

King and Mayhew (2002) stated that "helping students develop the integrity and strength of character that prepare them for leadership may be one of the most challenging and important goals of higher education" (p. 87). Parks (1986) viewed the years between 18 and 22, the typical college years, as the critical years. She in fact identified this period as a major 'make it or break it' time for the development of faith, identity, and similarly important aspects of the maturation process.

If it is possible to influence the moral development of college students as the research from the DIT shows (Buier, Butman, Burwell, & Wicklin., 1989; Rest, 1998, 1988; Shaver, 1985, 1987), then why does college administrators and professors shy away from this responsibility? Berkowitz and Fekula (1999) offered this explanation. "Many faculty members are hesitant to influence student character, and students are often resistant to such attempts. Those in higher education often balk at what they may view as tampering with students' morality" (p. 17).

Advocates of character education will find it hard to justify major efforts at educational reform until they can offer some reasonable prospect of achieving some measure of success (Pritchard, 1988). When evaluating a moral development program it is important to look at actions as the outcome of moral behavior. Emler (1996) noted, “goals of moral education are not merely to produce internal cognitive changes, however enduring” (p. 121). What the ultimate goals of moral education should be is a debate that has barely begun but one goal identified by Mosher (1980) was that it should have effects on conduct. Considering the importance of moral action, research should also consider discipline records and behavior. While moral development and character education programs are becoming more prevalent in higher education (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999), most are not comprehensive in nature and there is no data to determine effectiveness and informed practice (Leming, 1993).

### Methods

*Participants.* The population for this study consisted of 1500 students at a small Christian Liberal Arts College. A stratified random sampling was utilized for a total of 600 students. A random sample of 3 % of the participants who took the *Defining Issues Test* as freshman were participants in a follow up semi-structured interview as seniors.

*Data collection and instrumentation.* The DIT-2 (Rest & Narvaez, 1998) was used to measure the moral development of students. All incoming freshmen were given the DIT-2 prior to taking part in the Character Camp new student orientation program. A random sample of sophomores, juniors, and seniors completed the survey. The discipline and academic records were gathered and semi-structured interviews of three percent of the students were completed to triangulate the data.

*Data analysis.* The researcher compared the mean P index (Post conventional level) measuring principled moral reasoning ability for each group using a one way analysis of variance. A critical value of .05 was used to determine statistical significance. Next the researcher compared the mean P index scores using an independent t-test. A significance level of .05 was used. Discipline records and grade point averages for nine semesters prior to when there was no formal character education program and the first nine semesters in which a formal program was in place were examined. A comparison of means was completed. The interviews were transcribed then coded using the constructs: moral reasoning, behavior, and academic achievement.

### Findings

*Research question 1. Are there differences in the moral development of college students based upon number of years of involvement in a comprehensive character education program?*

For each class, P scores were examined using a one way ANOVA to determine if there are significant differences between the classes. A significant difference was found between the freshman class and the junior class and between the freshman class and the senior class with the greatest difference being between the freshman class and the junior class with a significance level of .012 ( $F(1,10) = 5.886; p < .001$ ). There was no significant difference between the freshman class and the sophomore class or from the sophomore class to the junior class. There was also no significant difference between the junior class and the senior class, although that is discussed further in a response to research question two. While there was no significant difference between the freshman

and sophomores and the sophomores and juniors, it is interesting to note that there was improvement from the freshman class to the sophomore class and from the sophomore class to the junior class. The ANOVA source table is found in table 1. The mean P scores for each class are found in Table 2.

Table 1

*Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for P scores between groups*

Educational Level (I)	Educational Level (J)	<u>M</u> Difference	Std. error	P	95% Conf. Interval	
					Lower	Upper
Freshman	Sophomore	-2.5538	1.45973	.299	-6.3146	1.2071
	Junior	-4.1741	1.36380	.012	-7.6878	-.6604
	Senior	-3.5430	1.36817	.048	-7.0679	-.0181
Sophomore	Freshman	2.5538	1.45973	.299	-1.2071	6.3146
	Junior	-1.6203	1.70953	.779	-6.0247	2.7840
	Senior	-.9892	1.71302	.939	-5.4026	3.4241
Junior	Freshman	4.1741	1.36380	.012	.6604	7.6878
	Sophomore	1.6203	1.70953	.779	-2.7840	6.0247
	Senior	.6311	1.63205	.980	-3.5737	4.8359
Senior	Freshman	3.5430	1.36817	.048	.0181	7.0679
	Sophomore	.9892	1.71302	.939	-3.4241	5.4026
	Junior	-.6311	1.63205	.980	-4.8359	3.5737

Table 2

*Mean P scores for each class*


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<u>Class</u>	<u>Mean P scores</u>
Freshman	27.3638
Sophomore	29.9176
Junior	31.5379
Senior	30.9068

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*Research question 2. Is there a difference in moral development between juniors with three years of a comprehensive character development program and seniors with three years of the same program?*

There was no significant difference between P scores for juniors and seniors ( $t(221) = .375, p = .708$ ). However it is noteworthy to mention the junior class had the same mean P score as the seniors with the only difference between the classes being that the juniors went through the Character Camp orientation program as freshmen and that program was not available when the seniors entered the college. The independent *t*-test comparing the P scores for the junior and senior classes is provided in Tables 3 and 4.



Table 3

*Independent t-test group statistics*

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<u>Educational Level</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>Std. Error Mean</u>
Junior	112	31.5379	12.73219	1.20308
Senior	111	30.9068	12.36326	1.17347

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Table 4

*Independent t samples test*

Levene's Test for

<u>Equality of Variance</u>		<u>t-test for Equality of Means</u>				
					<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Error</u>
<u>F</u>	<u>Sig.</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>Sig. (2-tailed)</u>	<u>Difference</u>	<u>Difference</u>
.029	.865	.375	221	.708	.6311	1.68083

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*Research question 3. Does involvement in a character education program have an effect on student discipline at the collegiate level?*

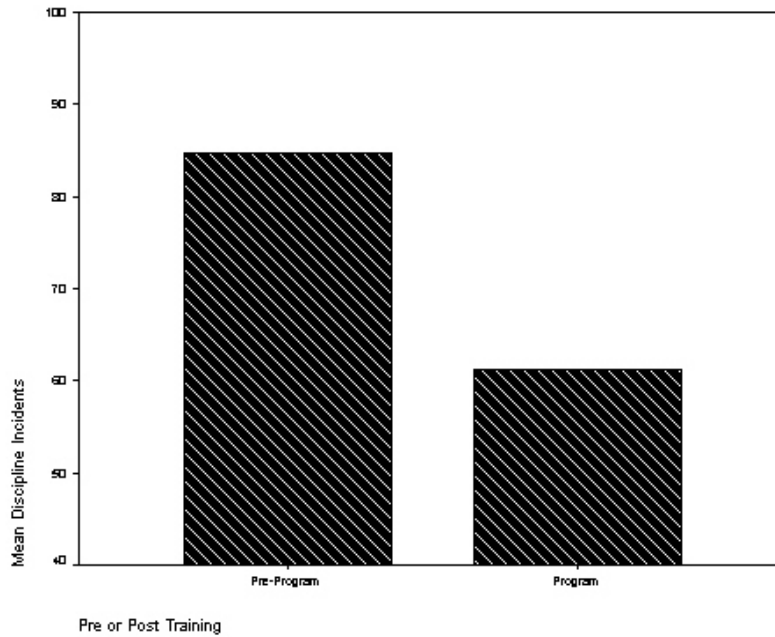
A comparison of means was conducted for the nine semesters prior to the initiation of the comprehensive character education program and the nine semesters since the inception of the program. This analysis revealed substantial differences between the pre and post program means. Discipline incidents decreased after the inception of the program. The group statistics are displayed in Table 5 and a bar graph displaying the means is presented in Figure 1.

Table 5

*Discipline incidents group statistics*

	<u>Pre or Post Training</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>Std. Error Mean</u>
Discipline Incidents	Pre Program	9	84.667	23.18405	7.72802
	Program	9	61.222	9.82061	3.27354

Figure 1



*Research question 4. Does the involvement in a character education program have an effect on academic achievement at the collegiate level?*

A comparison of means was conducted for the nine semesters prior to the initiation of the comprehensive character education program and the nine semesters since the inception of the program. This analysis revealed substantial differences between the pre and post program means. Grade point averages increased after the inception of the

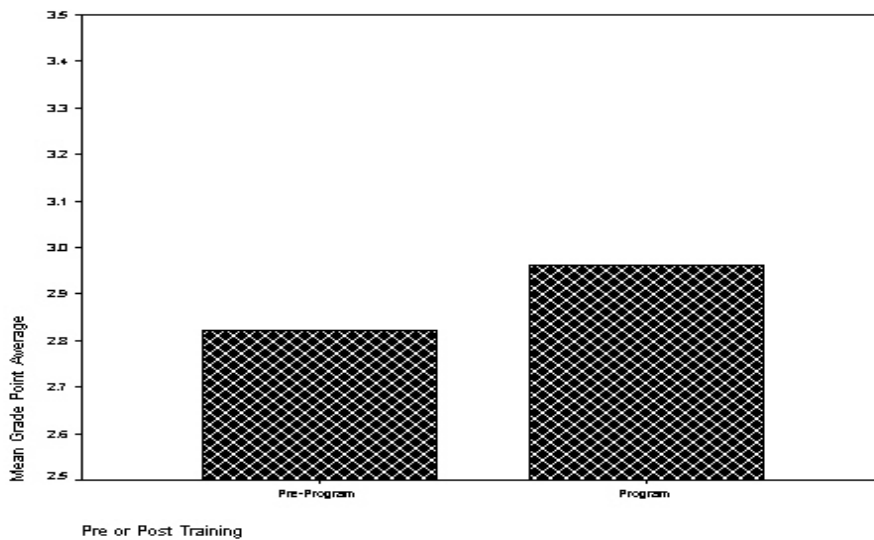
program. The group statistics are displayed in Table 6 and a bar graph displaying the means is presented in Figure 2.

Table 6

*Grade point averages group statistics*

					Std. Error	
		<u>Pre or Post Training</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>Mean</u>
Grade Point Averages	Pre Program		9	2.82189	.061633	.020544
	Program		9	2.96322	.048836	.016279

Figure 2



The quantitative results of this study were supported by the qualitative data received from the follow-up interviews. Every student interviewed noted that there was some developmental improvement in them as a direct result of the character development program. Several responses were given during the follow-up interviews relating to whether or not their involvement in the character development program improved their

academic achievement. The majority of the students pointed to the time management emphasis in Character Camp as well as the work ethic emphasis throughout the program. When asked how the character development program had an impact on their level of academic achievement, one student responded, "Time management. Because of the development program, you're better at doing work and fun, and also having to write an essay and having to manage your time and trying to figure out when you are going to do what." Another student expanded on the same thoughts stating, "[time management sic.] That involves responsibility and organizing, so not having a lot of time and having to be organized has impacted my academics, because I have to set time to do certain things, especially study and I think that if you set aside specific time and schedule your time, then you're more willing to really use that time efficiently and be prepared for your classes." Another student noted, "It has definitely given me a work ethic. It has taught me to be disciplined with my time, it has taught me to work hard academically. A lot of the major convocation speakers that we've had who have spoken about the work ethic that we try to emphasize here, has had an impact. Work ethic is really hammered home in a bunch of areas, especially academically."

Another student gave a different response "...to have good character, you need to respect your teachers, and I think that maybe it has helped me in that way, because I have learned that to respect my teachers, that means that I will do assignments for them and that I will show up for class, and things like that." The majority of the students interviewed noted an impact on them personally as a result of the program adding support to the data indicating the character education program has had a positive impact on students academically.

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study confirm what previous studies have found to be true, that moral reasoning ability can improve at the collegiate level (Burwell, 1997; McNeel, 1992). Additionally the data added to the body of research on character education at the collegiate level by revealing growth not only in academic achievement but a positive influence on discipline referrals, with a decrease in referrals. These findings are important because it indicates that a comprehensive character development program has an influence on students in a variety of ways. In analyzing the increase in moral reasoning between the juniors over the seniors perhaps the difference may be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that the juniors were exposed to more character development training than the seniors. Thus, it could be argued that these results provide the rationale that participation in the character development program is central to moral development. The intensive two-week orientation program also appears to play a significant role in the moral development process. Since the only difference between the juniors and seniors was that the juniors participated in the Character Camp orientation program while the seniors did not. This data coupled with the students' statements lends credibility to the importance of this type of comprehensive program at the beginning of a student's college career. It is noteworthy that every student interviewed commented on the importance of the Character Camp program and the impact it had on them personally.

Comprehensive character development programs can and do have a significant effect on a student's moral reasoning ability, academic achievement, and behavior even at the collegiate level. Follow-up interviews with seniors revealed that they all perceived a difference in at least one of the three areas studied due to the effects of the character development program. The student's perceptions were that the comprehensiveness of the program and the modeling of appropriate behavior by adults and upper classmen and women were important to the overall effectiveness of the program. These findings were also supported by the literature as elements that are regarded as crucial to the effectiveness of any character development program: comprehensive in nature and intensive at the beginning of a student's college years.

### Implications for Practice

Many universities either have just started character development programs or are considering the possibility of beginning such a program. Those considering the development of a character education program need to understand that a character development program can make a significant difference with regard to student moral development, academic achievement, and behavior. While the setting will certainly have something to do with the effectiveness, the students confirm that the program evaluated did have a significant impact on them. Also the students noted that the program needed to be comprehensive in nature and modeling by adults should play a major role in the program. It is the hope of the researchers that this examination of a character education program through the lens of moral reasoning, academics, and student behavior could provide a blueprint for administrators to develop a similar character education program at

their own school settings. Certainly the moral development of college students is worth such an investment of time and energy by college administrators.

Finally, this study provides one method of assessing character development programs. Since character is a very subjective term, and difficult to measure, it is imperative that a myriad of assessment methods be employed to determine if a character education program is truly effective. By using a multi-assessment approach to program evaluations administrators will create an effective process to justify a program's existence in this time of collegiate budget restraints. The moral development of our students at all levels warrants such an investment.

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