

November 9, 2016

A Qualitative Study of Moral Development of Students at Case Western Reserve University

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Background

Moral development has long been considered an important outcome of a college education^{1 2}. Moral development is an emphasis of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AACU) development standards for students. These standards include:

1. Striving for excellence.
2. Cultivating personal and academic integrity.
3. Taking seriously the perspectives of others.
4. Developing moral competence in thought and deed.

Despite this growing emphasis, universities continue to face problems related to the moral behavior of students. Cheating, sexual misconduct, and intimidating behavior undermine educational outcomes and continue to draw media attention. Despite the importance of moral development at universities, there have been relatively few efforts by universities to empirically a) assess moral development and b) to promote its development through study.

Funded by The Beamer-Schneider Professorship³, the objectives of this descriptive and exploratory study were: (1) describe the extent and depth of moral development that occurs during the course of an undergraduate education at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) (2) to serve as a formative moral experience for all participating in the study including the participants, researchers, and readers of the project reports.

Methods

This was a cross-sectional qualitative study approved by the CWRU Institutional Review Board. As such, the results represent a "snapshot" of the how CWRU promotes moral development, rather than a longitudinal comparison. Stratified random sampling was used to recruit junior and senior CWRU undergraduates for in-depth face-to-face interviews. The sample was drawn proportionally from the five schools within the university (Management; Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Engineering, Math and Natural Sciences, and Nursing) and from two

¹ Whiteley (2002) stated, "one of the fundamental obligations of the modern college and university is to influence intentionally the moral thinking and action of the next generation of society's leaders and citizens."

² Colby (2002) and Liddell & Cooper (2012) suggest that interest in moral development continues to grow due to criticism stemming from sources both within and external to the academy.

³ The Beamer-Schneider Professorship was created to develop undergraduate ethics. Elmer G. Beamer was the accountant for Kent Hale Smith, and Hubert H. Schneider was Smith's lawyer. At a time when there was a lot of corruption in Cleveland, both men were known for their integrity.

underrepresented groups (international students and underrepresented minority students). From the total eligible population of 2494 juniors and seniors, 198 students were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study, and at the close of the study 35 students had completed interviews. Participating students received a \$25 campus bookstore gift card. In all, 16 males and 19 females participated. There was generally equal representation across the five schools: eight students from Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, seven from Math and Natural Sciences, 6 from Nursing, 8 from Engineering, and 6 from Management. Recruitment efforts resulted in favorable balance across racial/ethnic groups (Table 1). The average participant age was 21 years, ranging from 20-23 years old. Eleven of the students had double majors.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed for this study in order to facilitate creation of knowledge about undergraduate moral development from the point-of-view of undergraduates themselves. The interview guide included retrospective questions about values and past experiences of students prior to enrolling in the university, current values and experiences throughout their duration at the university, decision-making challenges, and instances in which their morals were compromised.

Students were explicitly asked about their sense of becoming a good person, and an effort was made to elicit perspectives on moral development in the students' own words and vocabulary. The audio-recorded interviews lasted between 45 and 90

| Race/Ethnicity | Frequency | % |
|----------------|-----------|-----|
| AA/Black | 7 | 20% |
| Asian | 8 | 23% |
| White | 12 | 34% |
| International | 5 | 14% |
| Latino | 3 | 9% |
| Total | 35 | 100 |

minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The approach to data analysis was focused on the primary objective of describing student moral development. To that end, a series of team meetings were used to review transcripts and discuss (1) emergent themes and (2) the extent to evidence in the interviews could be found to disprove or prove the ideas and presuppositions of the members of the analytic team.

Summary of Results

Among the findings of this analysis of the student interviews are (1) a high amount of variation exists among students with respect to their moral reasoning at the point they enter CWRU and (2) Students vary highly in both the direction and intensity of moral development (hereafter, sense of being a good person) during their time at CWRU. This heterogeneity points to both *Areas of Success* for the university as an environment that promotes a sense of being a good person and *Areas for Improvement*. The results are described below in the context of three main areas: Academic Integrity, Experience of Moral Growth, and Sense of Community and Social Justice.

Academic Integrity: Areas of Success

Multiple students described ethics and integrity as influencing their decision to attend CWRU as opposed to other universities. Several students described witnessing cheating while visiting other prestigious universities, and stated that their experience and perception of academic integrity at CWRU was a key factor in their decision to attend CWRU.

Participant 121: *So I think that's also one reason I kind of want to go here, 'cause the atmosphere here is, 'recognize the value of integrity.'*

Students were aware of university policies on academic integrity and noted the consistency of the university in valuing integrity.

Participant 117: *Academic integrity is something that's brought up very often in classes and I think that that's something. Literally in every single syllabus, there's always something about academic integrity, so it's a word that's used a lot more in college.*

Students described the importance of maintaining integrity throughout the learning process. Notably, a nursing student in our sample described an immediate linkage between integrity in learning and future actions and competence as a health care provider.

Participant 113: *Especially since now that I'm graduating, this isn't just passing a test. It's killing a patient if you cheat on your Pharmacology exam. Then you don't know the difference and you might make a slip-up.*

Academic Integrity: Areas for Improvement

Of the 35 students interviewed, 32 (91%) raised the issue of academic integrity. The interview guide asks about the student's sense of being a good person and about decision making, but there were no specific questions on academic integrity. Despite the more positive statements above pertaining to the importance of academic integrity, the students raising the issue of academic integrity regularly described knowing about instances of cheating among their peers. Students who did not describe themselves as engaging in plagiarism or other misconduct, had a clear rationale for not reporting breaches of academic integrity policies. Some students described cheating as normative, and that this caused them to re-evaluate their own moral stance.

Participant 114: *People are just more open to it. It's like a very normal thing here. There's a sense of normalcy behind it, as opposed to hey, it wasn't like that where I grew up.*

Participant 101: *I think as a freshman, I did it a lot because everyone else was doing it, so I felt like 'Oh if I don't do it, I'll be that one step down.' I think it's comparable to like steroids issues and a lot of the major league sports, like everyone's doing it, so is it really unethical?*

In addition, several student responses point to a highly competitive academic environment in which their sense of what is fair and just has been violated. This perception was frequently cited by students as a reason for condoning or engaging in cheating.

Participant 107: *A lot of students think them unfair, so they don't feel bad about cheating on things or getting through them. Like they're like 'Oh these tests are impossible. We have to do everything we can to pass it, up to and including cheating sometimes.' I mean yeah, 'cause school here is really hard. I mean it's very hard.*

One student reported having learned from his experience at CWRU that moving upward in achievement necessitates a lowering of standards of integrity.

Participant 103: *I feel like as you progress farther up the echelons of academia, integrity does decrease and integrity becomes more of a luxury than like a staple.*

Interestingly, the majority of student discussions of integrity violations occurred in response to the interview question, "What has challenged you the most morally since you started at CWRU?" Theories of student development (e.g. Sanford, 1967)⁴ have suggested that as the challenges of a learning environment intensifies, a concomitant level of intensification of support for learners is necessary in order to produce optimal learner outcomes. The descriptive evidence from our qualitative investigation of CWRU student moral development suggests the possibility that a holistic intensification of support for students facing steep academic and ethical challenges could yield benefits for the university as a whole.

Experience of Becoming a Good Person: Areas of Success

The students interviewed as part of this project described the importance of coming to a new and more diverse place, being away from their more homogenous family and community, and being with new people who have new points of view. This experience of newness had a deep moral impact on many of the students. Students further pointed to the value of the campus Greek Life system and other undergraduate extracurricular groups as mechanisms through which they had developed stronger moral character. In particular, many students mentioned their membership in service fraternities or sororities as providing them with a framework and purpose for living. For example, when asked about the qualities of a person with good moral character, one student described their experience in campus organizations as having had a positive influence.

Participant 134: Before, I think I was more focused on the higher achievement side, but now I'm trying to see like what he or she can do for the community, like the greater good.

Some students highlighted certain university courses and subject areas as helping them to develop and grow.

Participant 118: Like basic classes, like Anthropology and Sociology really helps me understand why some people do things the way that they do, and it helped me to react in a more positive way, rather than just getting frustrated and not understanding why the person is acting the way they are.

One particular student talked about how they had become more accountable due to classroom learning.

Participant 114: As a Psych Cog Sci major, like I learn a lot about myself, and about other people. So like learning the way people work kind of helps me understand like my own behavior and why I'm doing things, and kind of not doubt other people's character as much

Of the 35 students interviewed, 12 (34%) specifically mentioned that they valued their personal experiences of self-discovery, moral growth and learning at CWRU.

Participant 103: Like throughout college, or I guess just throughout the last few years in general, regardless of what I was doing, it's been this more of a journey into like figure

⁴ Sanford, Nevitt. Where colleges fail: A study of the student as a person. Jossey-Bass, 1967.

out the extent of my capabilities and to learn more about myself than necessarily anything else.

Participant 111: *I think being on my own has challenged me more because I didn't/don't have my parents to rely on to help me make decisions...I definitely think being on my own has given me room to grow.*

Experience of Becoming a Good Person: Areas for Improvement

Students in the study varied according to the moral background they experienced in their families prior to coming to CWRU, and there was no consistent pathway for becoming a good person identified by the participants. One student felt that the university influence on their development was minimal as compared to family influences.

Participant 110: *I feel like most people learn their general morality, like what they view is right and wrong and good and evil before they come to college anyway.*

Overall, students lacked a holistic view of human flourishing. Moral decisions were often made using a consequentialist form of reasoning.

Participant 101: *So if the playing field is already unfair, I might as well just reap in all the benefits kind of thing.*

Students seem fragmented and are interested "self-streamlining." The process of attending the university is regularly viewed as an unfortunate and necessary barrier to personal comfort and achievement later in life. When asked to describe the most important characteristics of a morally good person, while some students identified characteristics like empathy, passion and accountability, a majority of students focused on a narrow set of values and characteristics that were largely self-referential, like honesty, loyalty and trustworthiness.

Sense of Community and Social Justice: Areas of Success

Students participating in the interviews had mixed feelings about the sense of community and social justice cultivated at CWRU. A total of 17 students (49%) described the importance of community service, role models who served the community, or the need to think about consequences for the community when making moral decisions. The majority of these students (n=13) described their family or their high school as the source of the value they placed on serving the community. Four students described having discovered a stronger connection to the community during their time at CWRU, and these students credited either their experiences in Community Nursing coursework (N=2) or in Greek Life (N=2) as having formed their sense of community.

Participant 132: *I would say we are definitely a loving community ... So I think that's what community means, just reassurance, but also being able to be yourself, be happy and live in the moment without thinking of anything. I see other people having that ability to really do something that's selfless in nature and that even though they're harming their selves, they don't care because they're doing overall a better thing for that community, or a better thing for that local group.*

Sense of Community and Social Justice: Areas for Improvement

In contrast to the students who specifically described the importance of the community and social justice, 50% of the students did not describe a connection to the community or any sense of obligation to the local community, the nation or the world. Some students made observations and expressed frustration at the lack of community consciousness of their peers.

In general, students valued the diversity of the community and felt that environment was safe.

Participant 134: I found like Case Western has a really safe and open environment. People kind of like express their opinions freely, and also it's like a multicultural community.

However, the racial and ethnic minority participants did not share this view, and nearly all of the racial and ethnic minority participants expressed concerns about race relations on campus.

Participant 120: I learned people literally are just in like this little bubble and have never stepped out, and coming to Case, which I found to be very not diverse, and for them to be like 'Whoa, it's so diverse,' and I'm just like 'No. It's not.'

It was not lost on a few of the participants, particularly the black students, that CWRU is situated geographically within a poor, black community with limited resources, yet participants described a disconnect between CWRU and the community.

Participant 104: You're between downtown and East Cleveland, yet there's less than a 2% African-American population or a 3% African-American population on campus. It doesn't really make sense to me, and then it's uncomfortable when you hear Case talk about diversity and really caring about the community and they're not there, except for like Case for Community Day, and that's twice a year, and so as an African-American who is from Cleveland, it's just difficult to be in a place that really doesn't seem to value where you come from, even though this is a city that our school is located in.

Students expressed that the university readily promotes diversity, yet the students of color do not report feeling valued by the university, and if they are, it is to advance the university's reputation; they are seen as an exceptional black student, not an exceptional student.

Students of color also described campus experiences that parallel the treatment of minorities in American society. The university community was viewed as an extension of these affronts, such as regularly facing micro-aggressions on campus.

Participant 104: Yeah, like I've already scanned my ID, a [library security] guard will still come over and be like 'Hey, can I get your ID?' The last year we had a big "We Belong Here" Movement because one of the cops was like basically 'We need to make sure you belong here.' Like just stuff like that on a daily basis, it's just kind of hard to deal with, and you never know where it's gonna come from.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Beamer-Schneider Professorship pursues the goal of a universality of ethics in which all CWRU undergraduates have had or know someone personally who has had a successful ethical learning program at CWRU. The results of this exploratory and descriptive study, using

qualitative methods, display some clear areas of success and areas of improvement for the university. Perhaps most importantly, the project has identified places throughout the experience of undergraduate life wherein resources and obstacles to good personal development can be found. For example, in the domain of role models, students highlighted the importance of having had good moral role models on campus, and although some students identified particular faculty, peer or administrative leaders as good moral role models, a majority of students interviewed had difficulty identifying anyone exemplifying good moral character. In the domain of coursework, all students were asked whether they had taken a course about ethics. Of the 35 participating students, only (15) 43% indicated that they had taken a course about ethics. Nevertheless, the 15 students who identified learning about ethics in coursework universally found the courses with an ethics focus appealing and important for their professional development. Students in social science, nursing, and management majors were particularly vocal about the perceived benefits of courses that had a focus on ethics and those which helped to undergo development as a good person. In contrast, nearly all participating students in engineering and pre-med majors were unable to identify places where they had an experience of good moral development.

This study also uncovered some important areas of concern for the university writ large. First, there is an apparent stigma experienced by students in engineering majors when they decide to choose other majors. This stigma is part of a pattern of narrowly focused academic achievement across multiple undergraduate programs, in which students feel that social aspects of their student life is undervalued. Second, there is a focus on instrumental learning for the purpose of future career success; students discussed having to sacrifice their current happiness, integrity and relationships in the interests of maintaining a high level of academic performance. Lastly, many of the participating students, particularly international students and those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, described circumstances in which diversity and inclusion are undervalued. Discrimination and bias were mentioned by multiple participants, and it is worrisome that some students expressed ambivalence when asked about issues of diversity and inclusion on campus.

Notably, the project has provided an excellent opportunity for moral learning among the project team and the student participants. Despite initial apprehension about participating, nearly all student participants openly expressed extraordinary gratitude for being given the opportunity to participate in an interview in which they could reflect on and discuss their own moral development. The findings of the project and the contents of this report will be discussed in a series of meetings and seminars across the campus over the coming months in order to further the learning supported by the project.