RICHARD H. HERSH ▪ CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

# Fostering Personal & Social Responsibility on College & University Campuses

**Educating for personal and social responsibility will take nothing less than a pervasive cultural shift within the academy**

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY had barely begun before the spirit of promise left in the wake of the Cold War was dispelled by a renewed sense of peril. Hopes for a "new world order" were dashed quickly and violently on September 11, 2001, when it became clear that nothing less than our way of life is at stake. There is indeed a new world, but order is not its nature. Moreover, where it exists at all, "order" still includes many of the same old oppressions that rightly offend the moral sensibilities of humankind. The murderous events of the past several years in such places as Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan, the Middle East, and the United States fully discredit moral relativism. Yet they risk also subverting the essential urge and need to understand and engage each other, especially the foreign and the alien-to-us.

The power of the moment is noteworthy, not because the media tells us so over, and over, and over, but because of the powerful forces, emotions, and fundamental beliefs now in play. This is the moment to revalue the concepts of civilization and what it means to be fully human, to renew our commitment to tolerance and freedom, and to reawaken our awareness of worldwide interdependence and ecological contingency.

Understandably, students come to campuses today in a state of bewilderment about all of this—a mood that matches their transitional time of life and their innate curiosity, awakening, and questioning. Although campuses import much from the larger culture, they also have special problems of their own that contribute to the exigency of the moment. Campuses face the significant problems of cheating, alcohol and other drug abuse, violence, and a sharp rise in diagnosed depression and in self-destructive behaviors such as anorexia, bulimia, and suicide attempts. For institutions that seek to educate the "whole person," the challenge of educating for personal and social responsibility has taken on new urgency.

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## Responsibility

In an essay entitled "A Moral for an Age of Plenty," the scientist-philosopher Jacob Bronowski (1978) tells the story of Louis Slotin, a tale that reveals in dramatic form the moral anatomy of the necessary interplay between personal and social responsibility. Slotin was a nuclear physicist who worked in the laboratories at Los Alamos to help develop the atomic bomb. In 1946 he was conducting an experiment in the lab that required assembling pieces of plutonium. He was nudging one piece toward another, by tiny movements, in order to ensure that their total mass would be large enough to make a chain reaction, and he was doing it, as experts are prone to do such things, with a screwdriver. The screwdriver stopped, and the pieces of plutonium came a fraction too close together. Immediately, the instruments everyone was watching registered a great upsurge of neutrons, which was the sign that a chain reaction had begun. Radioactivity was filling the room.

"Slotin moved at once," Bronowski reports. "He pulled the pieces of plutonium apart with his bare hands. This was virtually an act of suicide, for it exposed him to the largest dose of radioactivity. Then he calmly asked his seven co-workers to mark their precise positions at the time of the accident in order that the degree of exposure of each one to the radioactivity could be fixed" (202). Having done this, and having alerted the medical service, Slotin apologized to his companions and said what turned out to be exactly true: he would die, and they would recover.

In Slotin's response, we see in heroic proportions what morality is ordinarily made of. We see, first, an uncompromising sense that other people matter, an unconditional concern for preserving individual life and welfare. We see, too, a finely honed ability to size up a situation comprehensively and accurately, a tested capacity for systematic thought. Finally, we witness the courage to act. Slotin did not merely feel compassion and think efficiently; he separated the plutonium.

Morality, as Slotin's case suggests, depends on the orchestration of humane caring, evaluative thinking, and determined action. Consider what would have happened in that lab if Slotin had expressed only one or two of these three faces of morality. If he had possessed the cool knowledge and quick intelligence of the scientist, but had

felt nothing for his coworkers, how "moral" would his response have been? On the other hand, had he been unable to assess the problem rationally, how effective would his caring have been? And, however magnanimous his motives and logical his reasoning, what would they have amounted to if he had failed to act? Morality is neither good motives nor right reason nor resolute action; it is all three.[1]

The very same characteristics typically associated with "personal responsibility" are inextricably linked to the development of social responsibility as well. Personal responsibility and social responsibility involve the moral obligation to both self and community, and both forms of responsibility rely upon such virtues as honesty, self-discipline, respect, loyalty, and compassion. The formation of these personal and social dispositions is powerfully influenced by the character of the community culture, and the community's own integrity and vitality depends, in turn, on the values, actions, and contributions of its members.

## Is this our business?

The cultivation of virtues associated with what we label here as "personal and social responsibility" was a guiding principle for the original American liberal arts colleges. Following the framing of the U.S. Constitution, the colleges immediately owned a role in fostering the virtues required to sustain a self-governing republic. Drawing on this tradition, American colleges and universities continue to proclaim their role in fostering high ethical and moral standards. The mission of Duke University, for example, is "to provide a superior liberal education to undergraduate students, attending not only to their intellectual growth but also to their development as adults committed to high ethical standards and full participation as leaders in their communities." Similarly, the mission of Swarthmore College recognizes that "a liberal education is concerned with the development of moral, spiritual, and aesthetic values as well as analytical abilities." A recent study of 331 mission statements from top-ranked colleges and universities suggests that one-third of the campuses currently address values, character, ethical challenges, and/or social justice in their mission statements (Meacham and Gaff forthcoming).

Over the course of the twentieth century, however, the academy became increasingly

uncomfortable with the enactment of this role. Notwithstanding the evidence of a vestigial commitment found in mission statements, many educators are reluctant to address moral issues with students. Some fear imposing their own values on students; others believe that morality is an inherently personal issue, or that teaching and learning should be restricted to subject matter and analytical skills. Although research shows that dimensions of personal and social responsibility do continue to develop in college (see Lynn Swaner's article in this issue), the question of whether institutions of higher education *should* educate for such development is often raised. The view that educating for personal and social responsibility may be

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Yet if, by their very nature as educational institutions, colleges and universities inescapably influence students' values and ethical development, then reflecting on and actively crafting this dimension of education is appropriate. Along these lines, Berkowitz (1997, 18) has pointed out that "education inevitably affects character, either intentionally or unintentionally." Similarly, Colby et al. (2003, xi) agree that "moral and civic messages are unavoidable in higher education" and argue that "it is better to pay explicit attention to the content of these messages and how they are conveyed than to leave students' moral and civic socialization to chance."
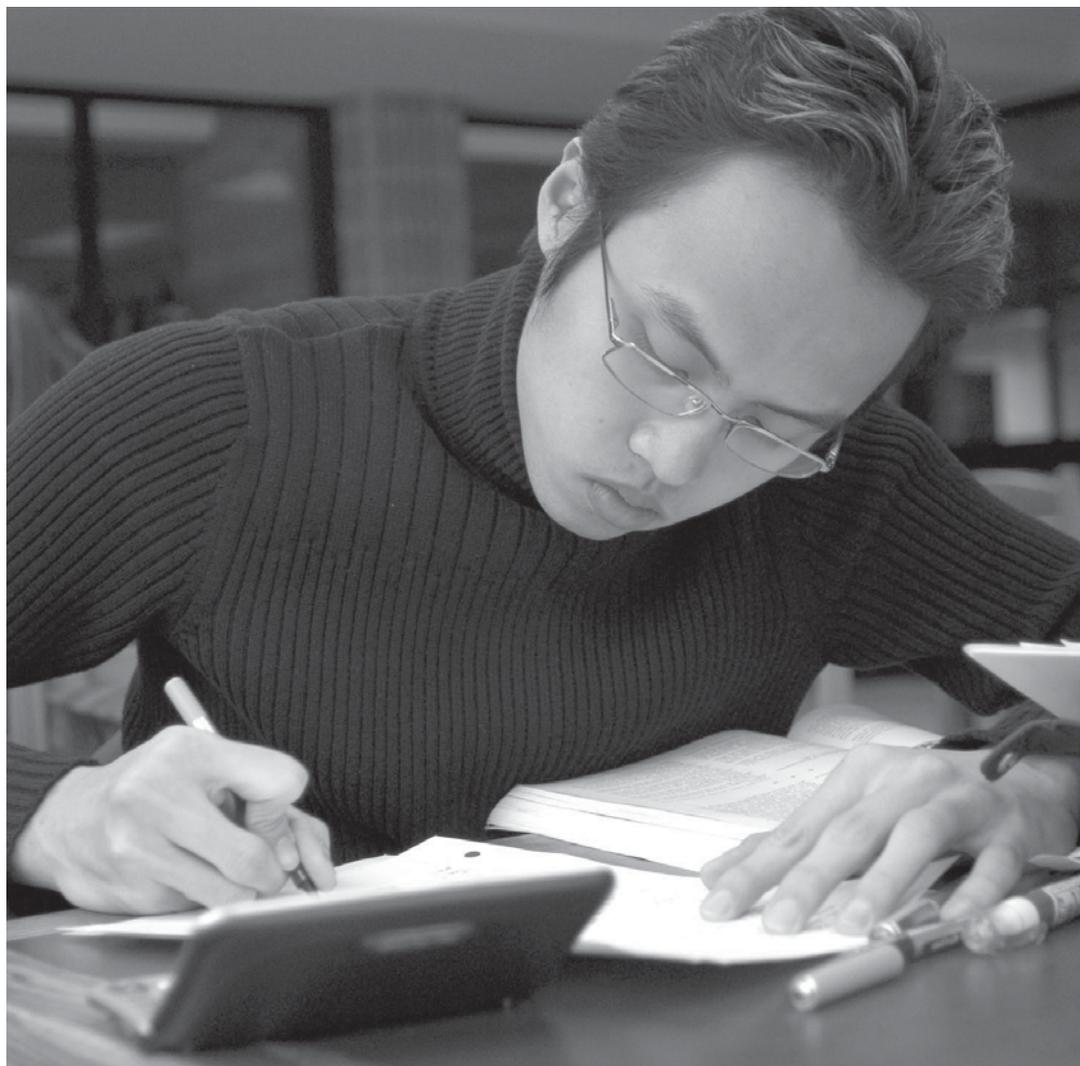
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Moving beyond the argument that institutions of higher education provide moral education by default, many view colleges and universities as having an obligation to prepare morally astute individuals who will positively contribute to the communities in which they will participate. *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, the national report issued in 2002 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), provides a descriptive picture of how educating "responsible" learners can have an impact beyond the college campus:

> Empowered and informed learners are also responsible. Through discussion, critical analysis, and introspection, they come to understand their roles in society and accept active participation. Open-minded and empathetic, responsible learners understand how abstract values relate to decisions in their lives. Responsible learners appreciate others, while also assuming accountability for themselves, their complex identities, and their conduct . . . they help society shape its ethical values, and then live by those values (23).

Developing these capacities likely requires an intentional approach above and beyond the traditional academic endeavors of colleges and universities. Educating for academic skills alone is not sufficient to prepare graduates with moral and civic commitment. Although many institutions espouse the goal of producing morally responsible as well as intellectually competent graduates in their mission statements, colleges and universities—in practice—do not generally educate for morality as intentionally or proficiently as they do for intellectual skills.

We know we can teach students organic chemistry; we know we can teach them Keynesian economics and the history of the Italian Renaissance. But if that is all we do, then we have failed them. If, in the process, we don't also teach students about passion and the relationship between passion and responsible action, then we leave them dulled. Our students will have all the knowledge and skills they need to act, but they will lack the focus or the motivation or the profound caring to direct the use of their skills. For that, our students will need passion with a conscience, passion imbued with a keen sense of responsibility.

## Reengaging core commitments

In November 2004, AAC&U joined with the Templeton Foundation to convene a national panel of leading education researchers in the fields of character and moral development. The purpose was to assess the efficacy of undergraduate education's contribution to student ethical and moral development. The panel reached two related conclusions: first, higher education must be far more explicit and expansive in emphasizing the development of personal and social responsibility as core outcomes of liberal education; second, robust assessments of these outcomes can and should be developed.

The panel was especially concerned about the inadequate attention colleges and universities give to the purposeful development of students' personal and social responsibility at a time in their lives when their identities are undergoing formative development. George Kuh (2005), for example, reports a decrease over the past decade in the percentage of students at all types of colleges and universities who say they have made significant progress in developing their values and ethical standards while at college. "A silent tragedy may be in the making in American higher education," Kuh concludes. "Faculty support for educating the whole student has declined and so have student gains in areas related to character development."

On most campuses, ethics, values, and social responsibility have become, at best, tacit concerns in the explicit college curriculum. Faculty members receive no preparation to address such issues in their teaching, and they often shy away from helping students connect the values implications of their course topics and themes with students' own lives. Recent data collected on nearly twenty thousand faculty indicate that fully half of them see students' development of a code of ethics or values as a low or nonexistent priority for their own teaching, while 87 percent view students' development of a deepened sense of "spirituality" as a low or nonexistent priority (Faculty Survey 2004).

As many leaders from residential campuses concede, the so-called "hidden curriculum" taught by campus culture works directly against the academy's espoused goal of preparing students for personal and social responsibility. Certainly there are many students on

any campus who exhibit all the qualities of personal integrity and social responsibility one might wish—and many programs that support them. Nonetheless, the evidence is abundant that students typically spend only a small fraction of their campus time on actual study; cheating is common; the party culture is at cross-purposes with both ethical and academic values; the de facto disconnect between student learning and student life tacitly invites students to keep their studies scrupulously separate from the personal exploration that inevitably occurs in college; and because of this disconnect, students frequently are left to their own devices in addressing the spiritual, ethical, and interpersonal challenges they encounter in college.

Many have expressed concern about these aspects of campus culture, but none so eloquently as Bill Damon (1997, 3):

The future of any society depends upon the character and competence of its young. In order to develop character and competence, young people need guidance to provide them with direction and a sense of purpose. They need relationships that embody and communicate high standards. They need to experience activities that are challenging, inspiring, and educative. Many of the conditions for the development of character and competence in the young have deteriorated in recent years . . . young people often encounter inattention, low expectations, cynicism, or community conflict. . . . All of these conditions must be changed if we are to create a society where youngsters can attain their full potential. The future of our society depends upon it.

Damon's succinct call for a "charter" change to more purposefully educate for character and



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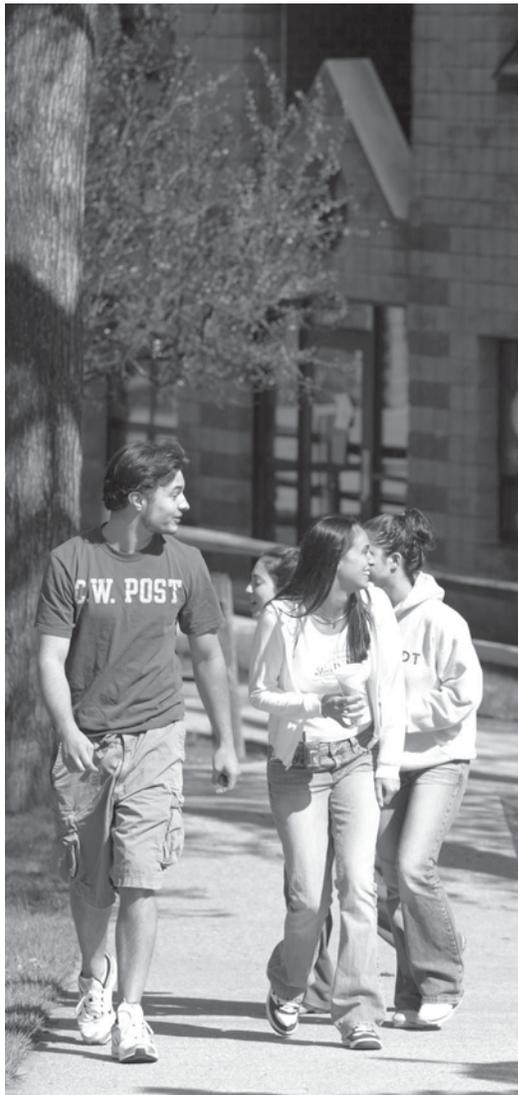


competence is every bit as applicable to the college years as it is to early childhood and adolescence. In this spirit, the panel convened by AAC&U and Templeton articulated five specific aims of liberal education that are integral dimensions of personal and social responsibility:

1. **Striving for excellence**; developing a strong work ethic and consciously doing one's very best in all aspects of college

2. Acting on a sense of **personal and academic integrity**, ranging from honesty in relationships to principled engagement with an academic honors code

3. Recognizing and acting on the responsibility to **contribute to a larger community**, both the educational community (classroom, campus life, etc.) and the wider community

4. Recognizing and acting on the obligation to **take seriously the perspectives of others**

in forming one's own judgments; engaging the perspectives of others as a resource for learning, for citizenship, and for work

5. Developing competence in **ethical and moral reasoning**, and, in ways that incorporate the other five aims, using such reasoning in learning and in life

Of course, it is one thing to articulate such aims or to say that we in higher education commit ourselves to purposefully enriching our teaching and curricula to achieve them. It is quite another thing to actually measure students' moral and ethical development or their acquisition of personal and social responsibility. Thus far, most assessment efforts have been focused primarily on the cognitive dimensions. In this case, however, the life of the mind is hardly sufficient.

### It's the culture...

If education for personal and social responsibility is to occur in college other than by chance, then such an agenda must pervade the institutional culture, and the entire faculty and administration must be committed to it. In arguing for this position, George Kuh (2005) provides six principles:

1. Emphasize character and moral development in the institution's mission.

2. Adopt a holistic approach to talent development—learning takes place in and outside of the classroom.

3. Recruit and socialize new faculty, staff, and students with character and moral development in mind.

4. Make sure certain institutional policies and practices are consistent with the institution's commitment to this agenda.

5. Assess the impact of students' experiences and the institutional environment on character and moral development.

6. It's the culture, stupid.

It is this last principle that embeds the other five. If we were simply to add a required course in ethics, or to designate a number of courses from which students might choose in order to fulfill the personal and social responsibility component of liberal education, we would almost certainly fail. Educating for personal and social responsibility will take nothing less than a pervasive cultural shift within the academy. Faculty are the key to real change, and we must help them integrate responsibility into all courses. This is entirely

compatible with teaching in the social sciences, in the humanities, and in the sciences too. Moreover, student life outside the classroom is rich with opportunities for integration.

**The time is right for an initiative**

Several nationally visible institutions—e.g., Harvard, Duke, and Stanford—have already made ethics an integral part of their degree requirements. Their high profile commitments reflect a broader trend, discernible across the academy, toward articulating ethics and values and the cultivation of personal and social responsibility as important outcomes of college education.

This increasing recognition of personal and social responsibility as a goal for college learning was captured in AAC&U's 2004 report *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*. This report provides a concise summary of the outcomes considered important for many of the professions (e.g., education, business, engineering, and health) as well as for the higher education community as a whole. Ethics, values, and personal and social responsibility emerge as prominent themes in the professions' goals for student learning in college. Moreover, the *Greater Expectations* report, which has been enthusiastically embraced by the academic community, calls upon higher education to educate "intentional learners" who have a clear understanding of the goals of their education and who include among those goals an explicit commitment to "individual and social responsibility."

A proactive, high-visibility initiative designed to take these goals seriously, to connect them to a vision of educational excellence for all students and for the larger society, and to provide evidence and assessment tools that demonstrate whether they are being met could make a powerful difference on campus values and practices. Moreover, in an era when fully 93 percent of high school students plan to enroll in college, such an initiative could, over time, produce an enormous ripple effect on what Americans consider the important aims of college education. In the coming months, AAC&U will be exploring the possibilities for just such an initiative.  □

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NOTE

1. For this analysis and further elaboration, see Hersh, Miller, and Fielding (1980).