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ARTICLE



Commencing character: A case study of character development in college

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ABSTRACT

In the last century, higher education has witnessed a shift away from explicit character education. Although scholarship has recently re-emerged on the importance of character in college, there are almost no empirical investigations of courses intentionally designed to impact student character at the college level. The current study examines an innovative course intervention called 'Commencing Character' designed to intentionally teach 16 target virtues through direct instruction, application of seven research-based strategies of character development, and engagement with over 40 commencement addresses focused on character. Comparing pre- and post-course self-reports, results indicated significant group differences in the development of seven targeted virtues when comparing students in the course ($n = 31$) to a control group ($n = 49$). These results show that a course focused explicitly on character in a way that is developmentally- and contextually-sensitive can promote the development of specific virtues.

KEYWORDS

Character; virtue; character education; college; commencement

Historically, character education has been at the heart of the liberal arts tradition in the U.S., but the last century has witnessed a major shift away from explicit moral education as many colleges and universities have turned their attention to expanding scholarly research and preparing students for professional careers (Kronman, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Reuben, 1996). While some colleges and universities mention qualities of character on their websites or in their promotional materials, most curricular offerings at higher education institutions are geared instead toward specialized disciplinary study, skill development, or career preparation. Recently, a number of scholars and educational leaders have called for a revival of moral education within the university (Arthur & Bohlin, 2005; Bok, 2020; Brant et al., *in press*, 2020; Brooks et al., 2019; Colby, 2002; Kiss & Euben, 2010; Kronman, 2007; Lewis, 2007), but their view reflects a minority report within higher education. Despite evidence that morally explicit coursework, intentional pedagogy, and facilitation of dialogue with diverse peers promote character-related capacities in college students (Mayhew & King, 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016), many faculty and administrators feel uncertain about how to offer character education to students

from diverse backgrounds, particularly in a curricular context, and some question whether isolating and assessing any impact on student character is even possible (Fish, 2003). As such, the character education that is offered—implicitly or explicitly—typically occurs in extra-curricular or co-curricular settings such as service learning (Lies et al., 2012). The result is that, despite some rhetoric to the contrary, few colleges and universities make character an explicit purpose of their curricular mission, even though significant research now shows ‘emerging adulthood’—defined as ages 18–29—is a critical period of moral development (Arnett, 2000, 2014; Nofle, 2015; Williams, *in press*).

One promising way to facilitate the cultivation of student character across the university is to create morally and contextually-relevant courses with a sensitivity to diverse perspectives and then assess the efficacy of such courses. Given the lack of intentional semester-long courses on character at the college level, there is even less empirical evidence of the effectiveness of such courses. The current study aims to address two gaps in the literature by providing (a) an innovative pedagogical frame for a contextually-relevant and -appropriate character course in the college context and (b) an empirical assessment of the course’s impact on student character.

Despite the lack of development and assessment of character courses in the college context, there is a culminating moment in the college experience where character is often celebrated as the most important aspiration and priority: commencement. A hallmark feature of most graduation ceremonies, especially in the U.S., is the commencement address, a speech of congratulations, advice, and encouragement from a university president or accomplished leader in a particular field. Although most universities prioritize the acquisition of knowledge and skill during the undergraduate experience, most commencement addresses focus on moral values and virtues. A content analysis of college commencement speeches from 1990 to 2007, for example, showed that helping others and doing the right thing were the most common messages of commencement speeches (Partch & Kinnier, 2011). If character is so important on the last day of college, why is not important on the first?

‘Commencing Character’ is a first-year seminar created to help first-year college students engage questions of character from their first day on campus and develop the virtues, practices, and knowledge needed to cultivate character, meaning, and purpose. As part of a university-wide initiative to educate leaders of character at Wake Forest University, the course joins an explicit academic focus on character with character development strategies that are supported by research in philosophy, psychology, and education. By combining character-related commencement addresses with pedagogical exercises intended to cultivate virtue, the course aims to help students not only ‘know what virtue is, but to become good’ (Aristotle, 1999, p. 1103b27–30).

The present study presents the theoretical and practical strategies at the core of this curricular intervention, analyzes the results of an empirical examination of the intervention’s impact on target virtues, and supplies evidence that character can be effectively developed within a university context when research-based strategies are used intentionally. The study provides both theoretical and empirical support for the intentional integration of character within the college classroom and offers a model for how interested faculty might both educate and assess character in college.

Theory and description of intervention

‘Commencing Character: How Should We Live?’ is a course option for a first-year seminar that teaches students how to critically engage sophisticated texts and complex ideas, understand and evaluate diverse perspectives, and develop skills for oral and written persuasion. Although the first-year seminar is a requirement for every student, students have the opportunity to choose among a variety of seminars, each taught from a different discipline or with different methods or themes. As one of these options, ‘Commencing Character’ focuses on helping students analyze texts and ideas central to character and rhetoric; apply ethical concepts, practices, and strategies to their lives; and develop or strengthen 16 target virtues: Purpose, Practical Wisdom, Temperance, Courage, Resilience, Humility, Hope, Empathy, Compassion, Generosity, Justice, Gratitude, Honesty, Humor, Love, and Kindness. These virtues were selected because they largely align with the Aristotelian approach to character education that frames the class. With the exception of Practical Wisdom (an intellectual virtue that informs the deliberation and judgment necessary for the exercise of every moral virtue), all of the other target virtues are moral virtues needed either to regulate and direct internal attitudes and emotions toward morally good ends (e.g., Courage, Temperance, or Hope), or to guide one’s actions, thoughts, and emotions in relation to other people (e.g., Justice, Generosity, or Compassion). The course includes a class session on how these intellectual and moral virtues might be applied in a civic context, but since moral virtues, unlike civic virtues (e.g., Cuyjet, 2020), are not typically the explicit focus of most colleges and universities, the course seeks to supplement any existing attention to citizenship and civic engagement with grounding in the moral virtues, which can help to direct the specialized academic knowledge and skills that students typically acquire in college toward morally good purposes in morally good ways. In this context, the aim of cultivating virtue is to promote human flourishing, both for individuals in the process of formation and the communities of which they are a part (Brooks et al., *in press*; Kristjánsson, 2020; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues & The Oxford Character Project, 2020). Character education can also support the realization of other goods that might partly constitute or contribute to flourishing, such as the promotion of academic integrity, the formation of ethical leaders and citizens, and the preparation of students for a personally meaningful and socially beneficial professional life (for a summary, see Brooks et al., *in press*).

The interdisciplinary course engages the work of philosophers, psychologists, poets, novelists, artists, and leaders from various fields and draws on texts from Aristotle, the most influential theorist of both virtue and rhetoric in the Western tradition. Aristotle’s work has been particularly prominent in contemporary virtue ethics and recent movements in moral education, including character education, citizenship education, social and emotional learning, and positive psychology (Kristjánsson, 2014). In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999), Aristotle offers one of the most systematic, holistic, and influential conceptual frameworks for understanding character. Moreover, his naturalistic, context-sensitive account of virtue and human flourishing is amenable to empirical investigation and compatible with a wide range of ethical and religious traditions (Kristjánsson, 2014), which makes his framework suitable for a pluralistic university context where students are formed by a variety of cultures, backgrounds, and traditions. In addition, Aristotle’s (2007) influential account of rhetoric explicitly includes character or ‘ethos’ as one of the three means of persuasion, making his thought especially relevant for analyzing and writing commencement addresses on character.

Aristotle's context, however, was significantly different from our own, and some of his views are morally problematic and at times pernicious. To be both critical and inclusive, the course interrogates Aristotle's texts to highlight the values, assumptions, and biases that underwrite his account and includes a diverse set of readings, visiting speakers, and exemplars to elevate perspectives from people of different races, genders, traditions, cultures, identities, disciplines, and professions. In particular, the course features commencement speeches from a wide range of thinkers—from Atul Gawande, Khaled Hosseini, and Toni Morrison to Eboo Patel, Claudia Rankine, Reshma Saujani, and Bryan Stevenson, among others. Such commencement speeches are typically given in a pluralistic university context and are accessible to intergenerational audiences, including students, friends, and family. Moreover, commencement speeches constitute a popular genre in the U. S., with prominent venues such as the *New York Times*, *TIME*, and *National Public Radio*, among others, publishing the best speeches each year. To select the most relevant speeches for this course, the instructor and a team of research assistants analyzed over 600 speeches to identify the 41 included in the course (plus one additional speech introduced by a visiting speaker). Many speeches focus explicitly on moral values and virtues and deliberately integrate ethics and rhetoric in their composition and delivery. In addition, these speeches often incorporate strategies of character development used in this course, including reflection on personal experience, engagement with virtuous exemplars, dialogue that increases virtue literacy, and moral reminders that make specific values and virtues salient.

Theory of change: seven strategies

To promote character development, the course intentionally integrates commencement addresses with seven strategies that are consistent with an Aristotelian approach to character development and supported by research in education, philosophy, and psychology. All seven strategies, which are discussed in greater depth by Lamb et al. (2021), are summarized below, along with their applications in the course. Each strategy can be utilized to develop specific virtues in individuals, although they often are most effective when multiple strategies are applied to cultivate multiple virtues in ways that support holistic character development. Importantly, the application of each strategy in the course allows for significant student choice in selecting relevant virtues, experiences, and exemplars to encourage autonomy and empower students to express their diverse values, commitments, and traditions. This emphasis on student choice helps to avoid the imposition of values that worries some critics of moral education (Fish, 2003) and enables students to draw from the diverse moral, cultural, and religious traditions that have shaped them while engaging other perspectives in the course.

Habituation through practice

As Aristotle (1999) emphasized, virtues of character are developed in ways similar to skills—through repeated practice. By habituating good thoughts, feelings, and actions over time, these capacities eventually become more settled habits of character (Aristotle, 1999; Lamb et al., 2021). The course introduces the method of habituation through readings and discussions and requires students to apply the method in various assignments. These assignments include a gratitude journal, which research has shown to be effective for fostering gratitude and related virtues (Emmons, 2007), and a 'Plan for Character Development,' modeled on

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (2005), in which students choose a target virtue, write a conceptual analysis of the virtue and its related vices, apply a plan to habituate the target virtue over a two-week period, and then write a reflection on their experience. While a period of two weeks is likely not long enough to develop a reliable and settled habit, this duration, which is what is permitted given the structure of the course, enables students to initiate a process of habituation that they can continue once the assignment is complete.

Reflection on personal experience

Reflection on personal experience enables students to reflect on their past moral successes or failures, which is valuable for developing every virtue, especially practical wisdom, the intellectual virtue that guides students in perceiving the morally relevant features of a situation and making wise judgments about how to act (Aristotle, 1999; Lamb et al., 2021; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). The primary method of personal reflection in the course is the 'Character Journal,' where students write 1–2-page reflections once per week in response to a prompt about a specific virtue, vice, or strategy of character development. These written reflections are often discussed in class, which provides another opportunity for structured reflection as a group. Students also give a final 'Commencement Speech' on the relevance of a particular virtue to their lives and complete a cumulative 'Final Reflection Essay' on the lessons learned across the semester.

Engagement with virtuous exemplars

As thinkers from both Eastern and Western traditions emphasize, one of the most effective strategies for developing character is engaging with virtuous exemplars, role models who embody particular virtues of character (Zagzebski, 2017). Contemporary research in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience suggests that exemplars can, among other functions, offer models for emulation (Kristjánsson, 2006; Zagzebski, 2017); inspire moral action and feelings of 'elevation' (Algoe & Haidt, 2009); supply actual or hypothetical guidance on how to act in a particular situation (Miller, 2018); improve cognitive understanding of specific virtues; and provide moral reminders that particular virtues are possible or important to develop (for a summary, see Lamb et al., 2021). The course applies this strategy through readings, films, or songs about or by historical, fictional, or contemporary moral exemplars; journal reflections on exemplars of specific virtues; and intentional modeling by the professor. The course also integrates several guest speakers, including Dr. Nathan Hatch, President of Wake Forest University, who shares several of his speeches and discusses the process of writing a commencement address; Dr. Rowena Kirby-Straker, a professor of public speaking who offers instruction and examples of how to write effective commencement speeches; and Dr. Donovan Livingston, whose commencement speech at Harvard University has garnered over 14 million views. The primary exemplar intervention is the 'Profile in Character,' which requires students to identify a personal exemplar, interview that person about their life and character, and then write a 4–5-page profile of the exemplar's character and its impact on the student's life. Students also serve as exemplars to each other throughout the course, especially in their 'Commencement Speech' where they share their vision of virtue with peers, which aligns with research showing that 'relevant' and 'attainable' peer exemplars are often effective for character development (Han et al., 2017).

Dialogue that increases virtue literacy

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, originally composed as a set of lectures to students, Aristotle emphasizes the value of discussing virtues ‘one at a time’ to ‘acquire a better knowledge of them’ (1999, 1127a16–17). Character educators now use such dialogue to increase ‘virtue literacy,’ the ‘capacity to know and understand the necessary language and virtue concepts required to evaluate morally salient situations’ (Arthur et al., 2017, p. 94). The course seeks to improve virtue literacy by assigning readings on particular virtues and then facilitating twice-weekly discussions of their meaning and definition; their opposing vices, semblances, and interconnected virtues; and obstacles to their cultivation and exercise. Students also write a conceptual analysis of a chosen virtue in the ‘Plan for Character Development’ and in a supplemental analysis of their ‘Commencement Speech’ to increase virtue literacy.

Awareness of situational variables

As Aristotle recognized and psychologists have now affirmed, human beings often are influenced by particular biases, tendencies, and situational variables that shape their character, thought, and behavior in various ways. One character development strategy thus involves increasing awareness of these situational variables and biases so individuals can correct or counteract these influences or choose contexts where they will not be activated (Lamb et al., 2021; Miller, 2018). The course assigns readings and videos on the effects of situational variables, implicit biases, and assumptions about race, privilege, culture, and class; presents prominent exemplars who recognize their own biases and seek to correct them; and introduces students to Miller’s strategies of ‘getting the word out’ and ‘selecting situations’ (2018, pp. 204–214). The instructor also leads discussions of biases in relation to specific virtues and models awareness by using blind grading to assess student work and reduce the influence of implicit bias on assessment.

Moral reminders

Moral reminders, such as honor codes, rules, or maxims, can make particular moral values, norms, or commitments salient and thereby make it psychologically more difficult for individuals to willingly neglect or transgress their commitments (Lamb et al., 2021; Miller, 2014, 2018). To incorporate moral reminders, the course assigns readings about this strategy, establishes shared class norms to regulate behaviors, encourages the use of moral reminders in the ‘Plan for Character Development,’ and requires students to include the university’s honor code on major assignments. The fact that students attend class twice per week and complete readings or assignments on other days means they are thinking about character or virtue at least three to four days per week, which itself serves as a moral reminder of character’s importance across the semester.

Friendships of mutual accountability

Friendships of mutual support and accountability are an important context for character development. Friends can support character development by serving as exemplars, providing occasions to discuss and exercise virtue, and supplying mutual support, correction, and accountability when friends need help or fail to live up to their commitments (Aristotle,

1999; Lamb et al., 2021). The course emphasizes friendships of virtue by assigning readings on different kinds of friendship, elevating relevant exemplars of friendship, and requiring students to write a thank you note to a friend who shaped their character. The course also encourages students to share personal stories in class discussion, which creates opportunities for deeper connection and trust. In addition, the instructor uses pair-sharing and group work to foster personal connections between students who become more deeply acquainted over a 15-week semester. All seven strategies are integrated throughout the course to support holistic character development.

The present study

The present quasi-experimental feasibility study was an examination of the impact of this course on first-semester, first-year student character development. The study's purpose is to highlight how existing and new character education pedagogies can be adapted with developmentally-appropriate content and transformed for higher education to promote student flourishing.

Hypothesis

Our primary hypothesis was that, on the 16 target virtues related to the Commencing Character course (Purpose, Practical Wisdom, Temperance, Courage, Perseverance, Humility, Hope, Empathy, Compassion, Generosity, Justice, Gratitude, Honesty, Humor, Love, and Kindness), students in the course would exhibit positive change that was significantly different from a control group when comparing pre- and post-course self-reports of targeted virtues. As an exploratory analysis, we conducted comparative analyses on non-targeted virtues that were included as part of our direct character assessment, the Values-in-Action (VIA) 24 Character Strengths and the Claremont Purpose Scale, to examine whether there were unintended effects on non-targeted strengths. We explored these hypotheses by conducting a 2×2 mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA). As such, we did not anticipate any main effects of time or group, but we did hypothesize interaction effects of time and group.

Method

Participants

Intervention participants consisted of students in two sections of the Commencing Character course, and control group participants consisted of students in various university-required first year seminars and introductory psychology courses in Fall 2019. The design of this study reflects the fact that students could not be recruited to the intervention class and instead elected to take the course. As such, the design of this study could not incorporate randomization into the sample recruitment. This aspect of the design is discussed in the future directions section below. That said, post-hoc determinations as to whether the sample size would be adequate for the suggested analyses indicated that a mixed ANOVA with two groups, two timepoints that can detect within-between interactions, Cohen's $f = .27$ (generated from Han et al., 2017), $\alpha = .05$, and correlations among measures = .5, would require 48 participants, or 24 participants in

each group. Determinations were made using G*Power. Attrition was 0% for the target course and 33% for the control comparison. The final pairwise sample was $N = 80$ ($n_{cc} = 31$; $n_{control} = 49$) at Time 2 ($M_{age} = 18.4$; 73.8% Women; 75% White; 13.8% Asian; 6.3% Black; 2.5% Multiracial; 1.3% Hispanic).

Procedure

Recruitment and participation took place at the beginning and end of the Fall 2019 semester. Intervention participants were identified by their enrollment status in the Commencing Character sections and recruited via an email from the research team prior to the first day of the course. Intervention participants were informed that their participation in the survey was required for their course, but they had the opportunity to voluntarily opt to include their data as part of the research study. Intervention students completed the first of the repeated-measures surveys before the start of the class and completed the second of the surveys after the final day of instruction. The control group was recruited via course lists for a first-year seminar and the psychology SONA pool. All participants were first asked to sign a consent form to complete a two-part, repeated-measures study, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. The SONA control group participants received SONA credits, while other control participants received a \$20 gift card for completing the survey both times. All participants completed two identical 30-minute online surveys via Qualtrics at the beginning and end of the Fall 2019 semester. The survey consisted of various measures of personal assets, character strengths, and leadership attributes as well as demographic information. The current study focuses on the explicit measures of character strengths encompassed in the survey. The procedure was approved by the institutional review board as a study that incurred no more than minimal risk to participants.

Measures

Purpose

Purpose was measured using the Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS; Bronk et al., 2018). The measure consists of 12 items and three dimensions: Personal Meaning (e.g., *How clear is your sense of purpose in life?*), Goal Orientation (e.g., *How hard are you working to make your long-term aims a reality?*), and Beyond-the-Self (e.g., *How often do you hope to leave the world better than you found it?*). Response options range from 1 = *none/almost none; not at all/a little bit; never/almost never* to 5 = *all/almost all; extremely*. Higher scores indicate a greater sense of purpose. Although the scale can be analyzed by subscale (see Mendonça et al., 2021), mean scores of all 12 items were calculated to represent student purpose for the current study. Reliability at Time 1 for the full scale was *Cronbach's a* = .84 and at Time 2 *Cronbach's a* = .89.

Global character

Other strengths of character were measured using the Global Assessment of Character Strengths-72 (GACS-72; McGrath, 2019). This inventory was designed using the 24 Values-in-Action Inventory Character Strengths (VIA; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and consists of 72 items. The 24 character strengths include Creativity, Curiosity, Judgment, Love of Learning, Perspective, Bravery, Honesty, Perseverance, Zest, Kindness, Love, Social

Intelligence, Fairness, Leadership, Teamwork, Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-Regulation, Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, and Spirituality/Meaning. In this measure, the character strengths are defined for participants, and respondents must then rate each strength based on three different dimensions: *It is an essential part of who I am in this world*; *It is natural and effortless for me to express my ____ strength*; and *It is uplifting and energizing for me to express my ____ strength*. Response options range from 1 = *Very strongly disagree* to 7 = *Very strongly agree*, and scores for each strength are calculated by taking the mean of these three prompts for each strength, where higher scores indicate higher levels of that strength. Reliabilities for the 24 strengths at Time 1 ranged from *Cronbach's a* = .59—.87 and at Time 2 ranged from *Cronbach's a* = .65—.89.

The following 15 VIA strengths were used to measure the Commencing Character target virtues: VIA Judgment, Perspective, and Prudence to measure *Practical Wisdom* (as mentioned in McGrath, 2018); VIA Self-Regulation to measure *Temperance*; VIA Fairness to measure *Justice*; VIA Bravery to measure *Courage*; VIA Kindness to measure *Kindness, Compassion, and Generosity*; VIA Social Intelligence to measure *Empathy*; and the following VIA strengths to measure the virtue of the same name: Honesty; Perseverance; Love; Humility; Gratitude; Hope; and Humor. Definitions of these strengths are included in [Appendix A](#).

Plan of analysis

The following analyses explore whether there were statistically significant differences in how students in Commencing Character changed on the course target virtues over the semester when compared to a group of students who did not take the course. To understand the relevant group differences in the current study without conducting multiple tests on the same dependent variables, we conducted a 2×2 mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) where the within-subjects variable was change pre- to post-course on each character strength and the between-subjects variable was whether a student was in the Commencing Character course or the control group. All analyses were performed in SPSS Version 26, and statistical significance was evaluated at the $p = .05$ level.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Homogeneity of variance

Given the small sample size for the current study, we checked whether the independent samples could be compared by assessing the assumption of homogeneity of variance between groups, captured in the Box Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices. Any analyses that violate this variance are noted (i.e., where the p -value of the test is statistically significant) and further explored in the Discussion.

Correlations

Pre- and post-course virtue pairs were significantly and positively correlated across all 25 virtues (Purpose and 24 VIA strengths). See [Table 1](#) for the overall correlations among the pairs of pre- and post-course virtues scores with significant effects.

Missing data

Given the types of analyses performed in the current study, missing cases were deleted pairwise, thereby leaving no missing data in the analyses conducted. There was only attrition for the control group, and the data are assumed to be missing at random.

Group differences in baseline

To ensure there were not statistically significant differences in baselines for each group and acknowledge potential for selection effects of the intervention course and the control group, we conducted independent samples t-tests for each of the Time 1 group means of character strengths. These analyses indicated no statistically significant differences between baseline group means except for the VIA strength of Leadership. The implications of this significance will be discussed along with the main analyses. See [Table 1](#) for overall and group descriptive statistics at Time 1 and Time 2 of the character virtues that showed significant effects.

Main analyses

To explore the differences in change between the Commencing Character course students and the control group, we conducted a 2×2 mixed ANOVA and examined interaction effects of time and group (that is, differences between groups in the change in strengths pre- to post-course). Target virtue analyses focused on Purpose and 15 VIA strengths: Judgment, Perspective, Prudence, Self-Regulation, Fairness, Bravery, Kindness, Honesty, Perseverance, Love, Social Intelligence, Humility, Gratitude, Hope, and Humor.

Purpose

For student purpose, results indicated a significant interaction effect of time and group ($F(1,78) = 7.63, p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$), indicating that change from pre- to post-course scores was significantly different as a function of whether a student was in Commencing Character or the control group, where, based on descriptive statistics, the intervention group reported increases relative to the slight decreases in the control group (see [Figure 1](#)).

Targeted VIA character strengths

There were significant interaction effects of group and time for five targeted VIA strengths, indicating that change in scores over the semester were significantly related to whether a student was in the intervention or the control group. Specifically, there were interaction effects for Judgment ($F(1,78) = 5.35, p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$), Self-Regulation ($F(1,78) = 5.02, p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$), Prudence ($F(1,78) = 5.66, p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$), Humility ($F(1,78) = 7.01, p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$), and Kindness ($F(1,78) = 7.25, p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$), indicating that changes in these strengths over the semester were contingent on the class type in which students were enrolled. For each of these five strengths, descriptive statistics (see [Table 1](#) for means) indicated some negative change in mean scores for the control group, compared to positive change in mean scores for the Commencing Character course (see [Figure 2](#) for an example of these differences). According to the Box Test, however, the comparison of Kindness scores violated the assumption of homogeneity of variance ($p < .05$), indicating that distribution of the two samples' Kindness scores are dissimilar enough from each other and thus might make the two group means difficult to compare directly. This finding is further explored in the Discussion. Main effects of time and group for the virtues

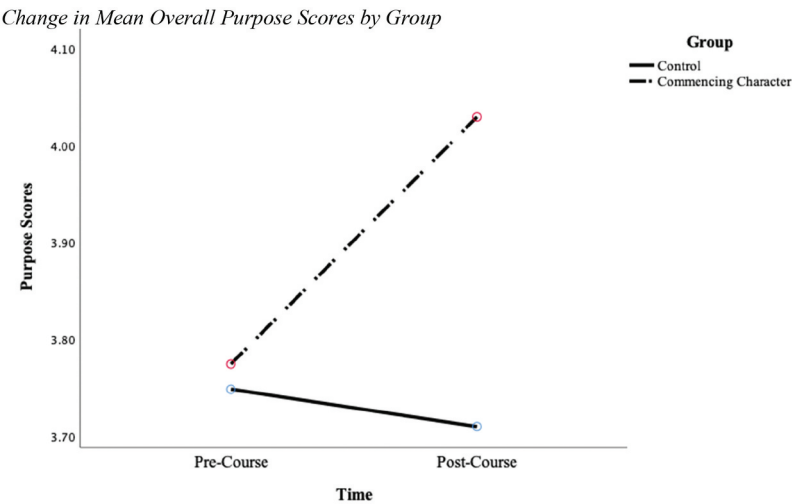


Figure 1. Change in mean overall purpose scores by group.

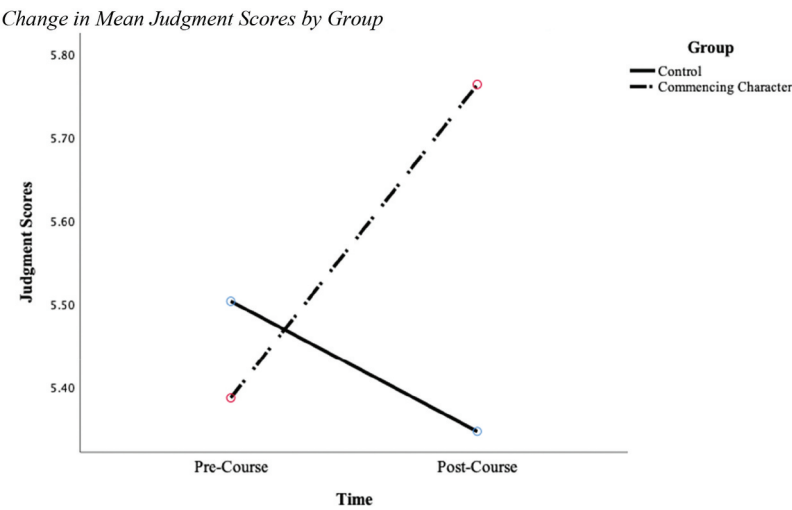


Figure 2. Change in mean judgment scores by group.

with significant interaction effects are included in [Table 2](#). For our purposes, we do not interpret the main effects associated with these interaction effects given that significant interaction effects explain any main effects detected.

Effect on non-targeted VIA character strengths

In addition to the targeted virtues of the Commencing Character course, we conducted mixed ANOVAs on non-targeted virtues that were part of the VIA inventory in order to explore unintended effects of the intervention. Of these non-targeted virtues, there were no significant interaction effects of time and group, meaning there were no significant differences in how the students in each group changed from pre- to post-course.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for virtues with significant effects and overall virtue pre/post correlations.

	Time 1 Mean(SD)	Time 2 Mean(SD)	Pre/Post <i>r</i> (<i>p</i>)
Purpose	3.76(.50)	3.83(.61)	.64(<.01)
Intervention	3.77(.44)	4.03(.54)	
Control	3.75(.54)	3.71(.62)	
Prudence	4.88(1.03)	4.94(1.20)	.37(<.01)
Intervention	4.92(.76)	5.46(1.04)	
Control	4.85(1.17)	4.61(1.18)	
Humility	5.28(1.02)	5.20(1.01)	.53(<.01)
Intervention	5.45(.92)	5.72(.88)	
Control	5.18(1.08)	4.88(.96)	
Kindness	6.25(.68)	5.99(.82)	.54(<.01)
Intervention	6.3(.60)	6.33(.59)	
Control	6.20(.73)	5.77(.87)	
Self-Regulation	5.08(1.21)	4.92(1.22)	.44(<.01)
Intervention	4.91(1.16)	5.16(1.18)	
Control	5.18(1.25)	4.77(1.23)	
Judgment	5.46(1.05)	5.51(.98)	.48(<.01)
Intervention	5.39(1.08)	5.76(.90)	
Control	5.50(1.03)	5.35(.99)	
Fairness	5.51(1.03)	5.41(.91)	.32(<.01)
Intervention	5.75(.91)	5.65(.90)	
Control	5.36(1.09)	5.25(.89)	
Forgiveness	5.23(1.15)	5.14(1.15)	.46(<.01)
Intervention	5.52(.96)	5.51(1.09)	
Control	5.05(1.23)	4.91(1.13)	
Curiosity	5.54(1.09)	5.63(1.10)	.72(<.01)
Intervention	5.81(.93)	5.95(1.11)	
Control	5.37(1.16)	5.43(1.06)	
Leadership	5.71(1.23)	5.56(1.15)	.69(<.01)
Intervention	6.06(.87)	5.92(.99)	
Control	5.49(1.38)	5.33(1.19)	
Hope	5.85(1.00)	5.58(1.07)	.62(<.01)
Intervention	5.90(.96)	5.80(.96)	
Control	5.82(1.03)	5.45(1.12)	
Honesty	5.77(.94)	5.52(1.05)	.64(<.01)
Intervention	5.78(.84)	5.56(.99)	
Control	5.76(1.01)	5.49(1.10)	
Teamwork	5.37(1.08)	5.28(1.12)	.64(<.01)
Intervention	5.59(.98)	5.61(1.12)	
Control	5.23(1.13)	5.07(1.07)	
Perspective	5.62(.95)	5.56(1.01)	.51(<.01)
Intervention	5.80(.75)	5.98(.73)	
Control	5.50(1.05)	5.30(1.08)	

Table 2. Main effects of target virtues with significant interaction effects.

	Effect	F	df	p	partial η^2
Purpose	Time	4.16	1,78	.04	.05
Prudence	Group	5.07	1,78	.03	.06
Humility	Group	8.07	1,78	.009	.09
Kindness	Time	7.25	1,78	.009	.09
	Group	5.61	1,78	.02	.07

Main effects of time and group

Other targeted character strengths indicated only main effects of either time (i.e., changes pre-to post-course on virtues regardless of group) or group (i.e., overall group differences on virtues regardless of changes over the semester), but no interaction effects. There were significant main effects of group on Fairness ($F(1,78) = 4.93$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$;

$M_{control} = 5.31$; $M_{CC} = 5.70$) and Perspective ($F(1,78) = 6.57$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$; $M_{control} = 5.40$; $M_{CC} = 5.89$), where descriptive statistics indicate higher intervention means averaged across time compared to the control group. Analyses of Perspective did violate the test of homogeneity of variance. There were significant main effects of time on Hope ($F(1,78) = 5.43$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$) and Honesty ($F(1,78) = 6.27$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$), where descriptive statistics indicate that both groups actually displayed significant negative changes in mean score (see Table 1).

For non-targeted virtues, there was a main effect of group for Teamwork ($F(1,78) = 4.08$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$; $M_{control} = 5.15$; $M_{CC} = 5.60$), Forgiveness ($F(1,78) = 5.86$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$; $M_{control} = 4.98$; $M_{CC} = 5.51$), Curiosity ($F(1,78) = 4.35$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$; $M_{control} = 5.40$; $M_{CC} = 5.88$), and Leadership ($F(1,78) = 4.93$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$; $M_{control} = 5.31$; $M_{CC} = 5.70$), although Leadership violated the Box Test. Descriptive statistics indicate in both cases that the overall intervention group means across time were higher compared to the control group.

Discussion

The current study investigated the effects of a course explicitly focused on virtue and character development on students relative to peers not in that course. The purpose was to understand whether students in such an intensive, virtue-focused course, Commencing Character, might experience growth in ways that are significantly different from students not in such a course, as measured by pre- and post-course self-report measures. We conducted several mixed 2×2 ANOVAs to understand whether there were differences in how student character strengths changed over the course of the semester when comparing those in Commencing Character to a control group. We were most interested in the effects for the targeted virtues as measured by the Claremont Purpose Scale and the VIA.

Targeted virtues

Group differences in development of virtues

The overall hypothesis that Commencing Character would differentially impact student character development relative to a control group was supported by the results of the current study. The analyses provided evidence of changes in virtue mean scores that were statistically significantly different between the course group when compared to the control sample for seven out of 16 of the course-targeted virtues measured in this study, that is, overall *Purpose*; *Humility*; *Temperance* via Self-Regulation; *Practical Wisdom* via Judgment and Prudence; and *Compassion*, *Generosity* and *Kindness* via Kindness. In these cases, the mean scores for those in the Commencing Character course, on average, increased, whereas those in the control group decreased. In addition, there were no instances where particular virtues increased for the control group but decreased or were otherwise stagnant for Commencing Character students.

Why Commencing Character? These results suggest that, over and above what the college experience provides students, the Commencing Character course is impacting student character development in a significant way, either augmenting growth or

protecting against declines in character. These effects could most likely be attributed to three major processes: 1) the course is introducing *unique effects* into the student development process that do not exist outside of the course, 2) something about the course is *moderating* already existing effects of college on students, and/or 3) the course is having a *protective effect* on otherwise negative changes occurring as part of the college experience. These primarily first-year students are emerging adults and therefore are experiencing a substantial amount of transition while negotiating their living situations, classes, and other daily activities with strangers at all levels of their contexts on a regular basis (Lapsley & Hardy, 2017). As such, there is, in theory, a plasticity to student cognition, affect, and behavior (such as their character) that can be leveraged by students' contexts (such as a college seminar), which this course clearly aimed to do and succeeded in doing to some extent.

In addition to maturational plasticity, there are three potential reasons why Commencing Character may impact students differently when compared to the control group. The first reason might be the explicit and organized focus of the course around virtue and character. Given that explicit moral content has been closely connected to moral development in post-secondary education (Mayhew et al., 2016), it is to be expected that there would be effects related to a morally-explicit course that would not be present in a course without a morally explicit *nor* implicit aim. The interdisciplinary nature of the course could also impact the different trajectories of development in those participating in Commencing Character. Interdisciplinary courses typically require the integration of several frameworks, some that at times conflict with one another, and can cause the individuals learning such frameworks to encounter and negotiate difference in relation to other students. Such encounters, and subsequent defenses and revisions of personal frameworks, might lead to the necessary cultivation of specific virtues during that period that may not be necessary in a typical first-semester college course. Research has also indicated positive outcomes related to moral development are more likely among humanities and liberal arts majors when compared to others (see Mayhew et al., 2016 for examples), which may extend to the findings in this study, although students in the course have not yet declared their majors and intend to study different fields, including some in the sciences.

Finally, Commencing Character explicitly uses seven strategies to develop character in students. These strategies are facilitated in the course in concert with one another and in ways that are not typically facilitated in other college courses. The case may be that these strategies, either individually or holistically, impact students in a way that is qualitatively different from a typical first-semester course. To examine the process in future research, we should measure or note these strategies to isolate whether certain aspects of that pedagogy are predictive of these changes in student character (that is, the cumulative effect of the holistic process and the individual contributions of each strategy) when compared to peers not in the course. Future research should also seek out a more diverse control sample (e.g., graduation year, major, course type) in order to explore pedagogical and contextual aspects that might explain the process through which this course provides such noticeable character change.

Why these virtues? In considering why and how Commencing Character might impact student character at all, it is important to consider why Commencing Character students

developed seven specific virtues significantly differently from their control group peers, that is, *Purpose*, *Practical Wisdom* via Judgment and Prudence; *Temperance* via Self-Regulation; *Humility*; and *Compassion*, *Generosity* and *Kindness* via Kindness.

The first reason may be that there is something about the explicit units around these topics that are more involved or interesting to the students relative to the other targeted virtues. The effect also may reflect the timing of the intervention during the first semester of college, a time when students are often trying to discern their purpose as they consider what to study (Arnett, 2014; Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016), encountering more demanding academic work than in high school, and attempting to make new friends and find belonging in a new social community (Lapsley & Hardy, 2017). A third option may be related to one presented earlier, wherein the interdisciplinary nature of the course and/or the seven strategies require the cultivation of particular virtues in order to succeed in integrating various frameworks, concepts, and pedagogical choices within the course. In order to confront personal and communal assumptions and strengthen or revise them accordingly, students need practical wisdom, temperance, and humility, as well as compassion, generosity, and kindness. By completing this process of interdisciplinary connection, students also are given opportunities to reevaluate their purpose. Moreover, all seven strategies require practical wisdom and humility, an openness to new information, and a willingness to change oneself. Most of these strategies require a level of temperance, as actions, thoughts, and feelings need to be monitored and modified in order to understand and live out the virtues. In particular, habituation, reflection, engagement with exemplars, and friendship all require levels of compassion, generosity, and kindness, both to the self and others. Integrating all of these practices and strategies necessitates examining purpose in some form, or at least exploring what it might entail. These hypothetical models and their processes could be the focus of future investigation in further iterations of the course.

Relatedly, another reason why these particular virtues indicated significant differences between the groups over time may be due to expectations of when change in a particular virtue would be expected to be detectable and, in particular, detectable by the type and method of measurement as used in this study. There could be immediately detectable effects of certain target virtues (perhaps the ones identified in the current study), whereas other virtues may require more time for students to practice and internalize before detectable change occurs (e.g., Courage). The beginning of the college experience may provide more immediate malleability of certain virtues, whereas the context of college in tandem with the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood might require more practice and contextual support to eventuate significant differences between students. It may also be that the method by which we measured character in this study might not be the best method to detect more immediate change in the targeted virtues where we did not see significant effects. Future research can investigate these questions by collecting data post-course to investigate longitudinal models of character and using both other types of self-report measures and methods that rely on informant reports (i.e., outside raters), behavioral observations, and other methods that can triangulate the measurement of virtues of interest. Future directions could also include considering other self-report instruments in addition to the VIA to measure change in the virtues of interest in this study, such as individual measures of specific virtues (e.g., practical wisdom).

An additional reason for these results might be that there is something particularly attractive about these virtues that make students likely to focus on them and even opt to actively practice them more than others. Two assignments from the course may illuminate whether these specific virtues were of more interest to students in the Commencing Character course relative to the virtues that did not display statistically significant change over the course of the semester in the control group. As mentioned in the introduction, one assignment was to complete a 'Plan for Character Development,' where each student selects a character virtue that they would like to improve or at least practice more intentionally. Students were also instructed to write a 'Profile in Character,' where they had to discuss the various characteristics of exemplars that made them role models in the students' lives. These two assignments, by way of qualitative analysis, may reveal patterns where students may focus more or less on particular character virtues. These assignments may be foci for future research related to character development.

Overall group differences

In the case of those virtues with main effects of group (overall group differences regardless of changes over the semester), that is, Fairness (for *Justice*) and Perspective (further evidence for *Practical Wisdom*), the overall group average for the intervention course across all timepoints was higher than that of the control group. Given that preliminary comparisons of pre-course means of the Commencing Character and control groups indicated no statistically significant group differences for these virtues, it is likely that those statistical differences can be attributed to differences in post-course scores. The case may also be that some of the targeted virtues are strengths of students who self-select for courses such as Commencing Character. The course may be more attractive to those who have a slightly higher value for fairness and perspective, which is then further reinforced throughout the course. That said, given the sample size and performance of multiple tests, it was outside the scope of this paper to investigate those differences as additional analyses. Future research with larger sample sizes may be able to analyze covariance or multivariate regressions to answer such questions related not only to the different ways in which the groups are performing on these measures, but also to what degree, how, and why.

Overall character change

Interestingly, the significant pre- to post-course changes on character regardless of group were negative (i.e., main effect of time). Hope and Honesty, regardless of whether a student was in the control group or Commencing Character, decreased significantly over the course of the semester, although the change in the means across groups did not cross the midpoint threshold, indicating that students were still responding positively, on average. This finding indicates that students are not disagreeing with the importance of these virtues in their lives but might simply find them less important than when they began the semester.

Alternative explanations for these findings lie in the context of the institution and historical context. The institution in this current study has an honor code to which students ascribe. Given research that suggests honor codes are effective at reducing cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty (see Miller, 2018 for a summary), all students across the institution might have evolved their understanding of honesty over

the course of the semester, thus causing a self-reference effect. Such an effect indicates that the students' understanding of honesty may have been enhanced or altered since arriving at college, and as a result, the way the students rate themselves as honest qualitatively may have changed over the course of the semester. Institutional effects may have a similar impact on student hope. In both cases, future cohorts should be investigated as to whether they show similar patterns to this particular cohort and what the cause of these patterns might be.

Non-targeted virtues

Teamwork, Forgiveness, Curiosity, and Leadership were the non-targeted virtues with significant effects, where the overall group average for the intervention course across both timepoints was higher than that of the control group. Given that preliminary pre-course mean comparisons between the Commencing Character and control groups indicated no statistically significant differences aside from Leadership scores, it is likely that those statistical differences can be attributed to differences in post-course scores, that is, a unique impact of Commencing Character on student character. Similar to the main group effects of the targeted virtues above, these results may be another indicator of self-selection. Students that are slightly more curious, ready to work in teams, eager to be leaders, and more inclined towards forgiveness might gravitate toward a class that utilizes those capacities, causing students already higher on those capacities to augment their character. These findings need to be replicated, perhaps with different methods to measure these constructs, and more work needs to be done to explain why non-targeted virtues might move in ways that are significantly different between the intervention and control groups.

Violation of assumptions

Although we saw significant effects for Kindness, Leadership, and Perspective, they violated the assumption of homogeneity of variance, meaning that the range and frequency of certain responses within the two groups were not similar enough to compare in a statistically meaningful way. It is important to at least highlight these significant results as there may be replications with larger sample sizes where distributions might be more similar between groups. In future collections, we hope to have both more iterations of the course in a year as well as the cumulative sample of cohorts over the years, which will aid in understanding whether these effects are replicable in larger samples and whether there are effects of context-level variables such as instructor, graduation year, course instruction year, and other group differences that are not possible with the current sample size.

Limitations and future directions

The findings of the current study are promising given that, even with a smaller sample size, there were significant differences in the development of character between those in the Commencing Character course and those in a control group. This study, however, has several limitations. The most apparent limitation is the smaller sample size, which can prove difficult

when considering the representativeness of a sample. In addition, the results of the current study indicate that, based on effect sizes, a relatively small to medium proportion of the variance in the outcome can be attributed to the interaction of changes in character and group. Other approaches to analysis, such as calculating Bayes factors, may further indicate limitations to the implications of these findings to the larger field of character development in higher education (i.e., distinguishing anecdotal from deterministic evidence). Future course assessments should include multiple cohorts and more students, which can provide the opportunity to not only increase the change of representativeness of the college population, but also consider other effects that may impact these group changes, such as individual differences between students, course-level differences among instructors, and even institution-level differences. Future research could incorporate these larger samples and variables in order to improve representativeness of the sample, account for between-class and -institution differences, and provide evidence of how Commencing Character might be implemented in other institutions with other faculty.

In addition, given that students elect to take courses, randomness of a sample and assignment to groups cannot be assumed. Therefore, there may be some self-selection bias for those with greater potential and openness to develop character, along with other individual differences that are indicative of certain types of growth and receptiveness to that growth. Future research should continue to identify baseline characteristics and, with larger sample sizes or multiple cohorts, check for various attributes of both individual and context that may correlate with changes in character virtue scores over the course of the semester, such as growth mindset. Identifying and accounting for such variables can help to support or create a clearer account of why particular changes are happening in one group compared to the other and how educators might further promote personal assets and contextual conditions that augment character development strategies. One solution for future research, should an institution have the ability, would be to randomly assign students to the control and intervention groups and create a randomized control trial that would control for these effects by the creation of nested samples.

Moreover, as mentioned above, it may be that there are delayed impacts of the course on target virtues that cannot be detected in the immediate pre- and post-course surveys. Having more than two times of measurement may reveal the long-term impact of the intervention, provide evidence of enduring positive change, and offer an opportunity to explore individual and group-level differences over longer periods of time. As such, we intend to collect follow-up data with future iterations of this course so we can not only track changes in character virtue levels, but also see whether there are other choices that alumni of the course might select that differentiate them from their peers in the control group.

An additional future direction for this research is to use multiple forms of data and raters. Self-report measures of socially desirable attributes, such as virtues, are subject to the personal bias to report oneself inaccurately. Participants might also interpret the meaning of items and constructs differently than intended (Brocato et al., 2020; Meindl et al., 2015; Vazire, 2010). When considering replicability, future research should continue to triangulate virtues of interest using multiple raters and methods to determine holistic indicators of character change, as well as perform necessary steps to ensure the validity of self-report measures. In addition, the measures used in this study are only one subset of many different measures of character. The majority of measures in this literature are not necessarily constructed to be sensitive to change. Therefore, future research should consider how to create such measures

that are developmentally appropriate, are interpreted the way we intend them to be (e.g., employing cognitive interviews), and ensure that the structure of these measures is consistent over time, using methods such as examining measurement invariance.

Conclusions and applications

The aim of this paper has been to explore how research-based strategies of character development could be successfully integrated into a college course and to show changes among students in the course compared to peers not in the course. The results of the Commencing Character course indicate that there were not only positive changes in virtues among students in this course, but for seven of those virtues, Commencing Character students developed in ways that were significantly different from those not participating in this course. These findings indicate the efficacy and importance of this course and the promise of augmenting the college experience through contextually- and developmentally-relevant methods to develop character. Given the course's effectiveness in promoting character development, Commencing Character can provide a model for how faculty can effectively integrate character in college, beginning in the first semester.

The evidence for the particular effectiveness of Commencing Character also opens up avenues to explore the reasons for its impact. Is it the case that the combination of the seven strategies is holistically greater than the sum of its parts? Which individual differences should be considered when thinking about the generalizability of this pedagogy, and how do contextual changes (e.g., instructor, institution, course content) shape possible implementation? Future research can examine which individual assets and barriers to growth are most related to the changes detected in character virtue scores. It can also explore which strategies are most effective, how this course might compare to other courses with explicit moral content, and so on. Identifying the components and complexities of the greater individual-context bidirectional system that promotes character development in college will help to both connect scholarship on college students to the character development scholarship on K-12 students and provide a more holistic portrait of how higher education institutions can develop the whole person. For now, evidence from Commencing Character shows that intentionally educating character, particularly at a critical time for emerging adults, can promote virtue development among college students, well before they walk across the stage at commencement.

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Appendix A: Definition of Strengths Measuring Targeted Virtues

Target Virtue	VIA Strength	VIA Definition: (GACS-72; McGrath, 2019)
Practical Wisdom	Judgment	You are analytical; you examine things from all sides; you do not jump to conclusions, but instead attempt to weigh all the evidence when making decisions.
Temperance	Perspective	You take the 'big picture' view of things; others turn to you for wise advice; you help others make sense of the world; you learn from your mistakes.
	Prudence	You are wisely cautious; you are playful and conscientious; you are careful to not take undue risks or do things you might later regret.
	Self-Regulation	You are a very disciplined person; you manage your vices and bad habits; you stay calm and cool under pressure; you manage your impulses and emotions.
Justice	Fairness	You believe strongly in an equal and just opportunity for all; you don't let personal feelings bias your decisions about others; you treat people the way you want to be treated.
Kindness	Kindness	You do good things for people; you help and care for others; you are generous and giving; you are compassionate.
Compassion	Social Intelligence	You pay close attention to social nuances and the emotions of others; you have good insight into what makes people 'tick'; you seem to know what to say and do in any social situation.
Generosity		
Empathy		
Honesty	Honesty	You are a person of high integrity and authenticity; you tell the truth, even when it hurts; you present yourself to others in a sincere way; you take responsibility for your actions.
Perseverance	Perseverance	You keep going and going when you have a goal in mind; you attempt to overcome all obstacles; you finish what you start.
Love	Love	You are warm and genuine to others; you not only share but are open to receiving love from others; you value growing close and intimate with others.
Humility	Humility	You let your accomplishments speak for themselves; you see your own goodness but prefer to focus the attention on others; you do not see yourself as more special than others; you admit your imperfections.
Gratitude	Gratitude	You regularly experience and express thankfulness; you don't take the good things that happen in your life for granted; you tend to feel blessed in many circumstances.
Hope	Hope	You are optimistic, expecting the best to happen; you believe in and work toward a positive future; you can think of many pathways to reach your goals.
Humor	Humor	You are playful; you love to make people smile and laugh; your sense of humor helps you connect closely to others; you brighten gloomy situations with fun and/or jokes.