Evidence Suggests Good Character and Ethical Behavior Promotes Both Individual and Collective Wellbeing

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Executive Summary. There is ample evidence from multiple sources that an array of attitudes, dispositions, and habits correlate well with wellbeing in life, both for individuals and for societies. The characteristics are not surprising, and include such examples as gratitude, generosity toward others, forgiveness, humility, integrity, honesty and trustworthiness. In many cases the evidence comes from research in positive psychology, but other fields are also involved, including medicine, political science, economics, sociology, public safety, and other fields. While this evidence is largely from correlation and may not necessarily be causative, it indicates that there are perhaps many potential educational experiences capable of producing enhancement to lifelong wellbeing beyond enhancements to a sense of belonging, agency, purpose and meaning. However, this only intensifies the need for experimentation with different pedagogical interventions to determine if and how these characteristics may be successfully "taught" or inspired in student populations in ways that result in lasting wellbeing long after the college experience. In general, this will require diligent assessment over several decades with reliable metrics that are nationally normed. This is the central work of the LearningWell Coalition.

Considering Life Goals. A recent survey of millennials found that over 80% list becoming rich is among their major life goals, and another 50% of those same millennials said that another major life goal is to become famous (Waldinger). Apparently, there is a strong belief among college students today that becoming rich and famous will lead to a good life. This is not new.

A popular bumper sticker from the 1980s

But scientific evidence from the Harvard Study of Adult Development—one of the most comprehensive studies in history—indicates that people who invest in long-term relationships based on trust, respect, and compassion have the highest levels of wellbeing throughout life—independent of wealth, fame, or other measures of success. On the other hand, wealth and fame are actually orthogonal to happiness[1]. They don't make you happy or unhappy. However, the *pursuit* of those things at the expense of investing in human connections makes people less happy and less healthy.

As a result, promoting *early* conversations with college students about what it means to create a "good life" with long-term wellbeing is likely an important preliminary step in developing educational experiences that result in improvements in long term outcomes for alumni. Educating students about the difference between dedicating oneself to accumulating wealth and fame—or on the other hand, seeking life-long wellbeing, which has more dimensions—may be

[1] Except, perhaps, for those living at or below the poverty level.

an important step that we can take to improve long-term outcomes. Students can't address a problem they aren't aware of or aren't willing to have.

The Good Life, Long-term Wellbeing, Flourishing, and Thriving. Although there are several competent definitions of a good life[2], the Coalition has focused on the definition adopted about 80 years ago by the Gallup company who has used it for decades in ranking the world's "happiest" countries. It involves five dimensions: career, social, financial, physical, and community wellbeing. This longitudinal Gallup data provides the only currently available opportunity to explore the *long-term* impact (decades after the college years) of interventions we implement today. These are obtained by correlation studies with the Gallup data to extrapolate into future decades.

However, when reviewing the evidence for character and ethics in promoting wellbeing, the lack of available data in this area from the Gallup surveys requires that we broaden our review and consider evidence from multiple sources, even though most of it is limited to short-term assessment immediately after the learning experience. This evidence is included in the current summary to illustrate what we know about good character and ethical behavior as it correlates with wellbeing.

Some Elements of Good Character and Ethical Behavior. What follows is a sample of the evidence for several (but not all) of the possible elements that are characteristic of good

[2] Several definitions of living a good life have been developed, including the concept of wellbeing, and the concepts of flourishing and thriving. They all share a similar goal of deepening our understanding of the dimensions of a good life and they overlap in many ways. But they are also distinct in some ways. The Gallup definition of Wellbeing dates back about 80 years and includes five dimensions to wellbeing: (1) career, (2) social, (3) financial, (4) physical (and mental), and (5) community. This Gallup definition forms the basis of decades of assessment including the Gallup Purdue Index in 2014 that played an important role in the formation of the Coalition, and also the annual Happiest Countries survey that ranks nations globally for their societal wellbeing. The availability of this longitudinal data on wellbeing is of central importance to the mission of the Coalition. The concept of flourishing dates back to the ancient Greeks and in particular Aristotle, whose concept of "eudaimonia" describes the state of living a good life by cultivating virtue and reaching one's full potential as a human being. In the context of current efforts to measure flourishing, the work of Martin Seligman in 2011at the University of Pennsylvania in his PERMA model provides an important map of flourishing, including positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). In 2016, another definition of flourishing was proposed by the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University which defines flourishing as "living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good." The specific dimensions include (1) subjective well-being, (2) physical health, (3) close social relationships, (4) character and virtue, and (5) meaning and purpose. Independently, the notion of thriving also presents a definition of living a good life that is relevant to this discussion. Human thriving is defined as a state of optimal wellbeing where an individual experiences a high level of personal fulfillment, purpose, and positive functioning across various aspects of their life, including physical, mental, social, and spiritual health, often characterized by a sense of growth, resilience, and meaningful contribution to their community; essentially, living life to its fullest potential.

character and ethical behavior. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but instead is lillustrative of the type of evidence that is available today that correlates elements of this kind with wellbeing later in life.

Gratitude. Research strongly suggests (Emmons), (Stoerkel), (Sansone and Sansone), (American Heart Association), (McDermott), (NIH News in Health) that practicing gratitude is associated with improved well-being and mental health. Gratitude is linked to increased happiness, reduced stress, and better overall emotional well-being.

Research indicates that gratitude improves wellbeing in several ways, including reducing stress and anxiety by lowering stress hormones like cortisol, leading to decreased anxiety and improved mood. Gratitude also can be shown to boost self-esteem and confidence by recognizing and appreciating the positive aspects of your life that can counteract negative self-talk and foster self-acceptance. Expressing gratitude further improves relationships by strengthening bonds and fostering positive interactions. Gratitude practices can promote relaxation and reduce worries, contributing to better sleep, while improving resilience. Finally, regularly expressing gratitude can shift your focus towards the good in your life, leading to increased happiness and contentment.

Some methods for cultivating gratitude include regularly writing down things you are thankful for, fostering a habit of appreciation, showing appreciation through words or actions, strengthening relationships and promoting positive emotions. In addition, taking time to reflect on things you are grateful for can deepen your awareness and appreciation for the good in your life. Finally, regularly expressing gratitude for even small things in your life can foster a sense of appreciation and a sense of wellbeing (Emmons).

In essence, gratitude promotes well-being by fostering positive emotions, reducing stress, and enhancing overall life satisfaction. By intentionally cultivating gratitude, you can contribute to a more positive and fulfilling life.

Altruism and Generosity. It is not difficult to find evidence for many other elements of good character and ethical behavior that correlate well with a good life—both individually and collectively. For example, evidence shows that spending money on others promotes happiness (Dunn, Aknin, and Norton). This widely cited study showed that spending money on others produced greater happiness than accumulating more money for oneself. In addition, it showed that participants who were randomly assigned to spend money on others experienced greater happiness than those who were assigned to spend money on themselves. A larger more recent study (Aknin, et al) reached the same empirical conclusion, based on a sample size of greater than 5,000 participants. In addition, there is evidence that participating in altruistic behaviors also reduces physical pain (Wang, et al). Similar results and more interpretation are available in this more recent news article (Sima).

Extensive research on the science of generosity has been produced at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California at Berkeley (Allen). The research conducted and monitored there further confirms the positive benefits of engagement in altruistic activity and generosity on health and wellbeing in several dimensions.

On a national level, America has historically been one of the most generous nations on earth, based on the percentage of our population that voluntarily contributes a portion of their wealth

and/or time to charitable causes for others. While some speculate that this is a natural consequence of the fact that America is one of the wealthiest nations on earth, there is some research that contradicts this conclusion. In particular, Claire Gaudiani, former President of Connecticut College, wrote about this about twenty years ago in an insightful book (Gaudiani, 2004). In short, she explained her thesis this way:

> *"Most people think Americans are generous because we are rich. However, the truth is that we are rich, in significant part, because we are generous."*
> Claire Gaudini, President Emerita, Connecticut College (Gaudiani, 2003).

The conclusion is that a commitment to altruism and generosity provides a significant advantage in producing both personal and collective wellbeing.

Another study (Brooks) investigated IRS tax data on philanthropic giving across a broad cross section of the American population and found that those with any form of religious background are the most generous Americans. This affiliation is apparently more predictive than personal wealth, political affiliation, or any other characteristic. The conclusion is that spiritual belief plays a role in philanthropic behavior in America. (However, this study did not examine correlations with measures of wellbeing.)

In summary, the characteristics of generosity toward others and altruism are positively correlated with both personal and collective wellbeing.

Forgiveness. Research shows (Johns Hopkins Medicine) (Mayo Clinic Healthy Lifestyle) (Bechara, et al) that forgiveness can promote wellbeing in several ways. For example, forgiveness can improve mental health by reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. It can also improve self-esteem and promote a sense of flourishing. In addition, forgiveness can improve physical health by lowering blood pressure, improving cholesterol levels, and reducing pain. It can also strengthen the immune system and improve heart health. Forgiveness can also lead to healthier relationships and can be a form of coping that helps alleviate perceptions of stress.

Forgiveness learning experiences can be effective in promoting mental wellbeing. For example, one study found that participants who completed a self-directed forgiveness intervention workbook saw improvements in their ability to forgive, as well as reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms.

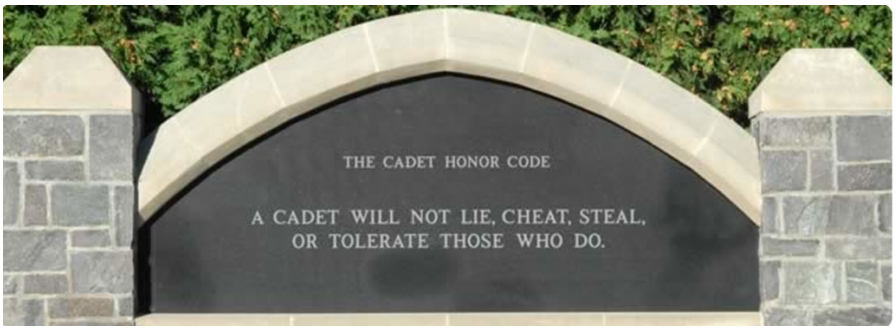
Learning experiences in forgiveness can involve letting go of anger, resentment, and negative past events, realizing that the best revenge is no revenge, living in the present and learning from the past, hoping and planning for the future, acknowledging the wrongdoer as a moral agent who has failed, but respecting the perpetrator's perspective.

Humility. Research suggests (Whitcoomb, et al.), (Porter and Schumann), (Schaffner), (Twenge and Campbell) that humility is strongly related to increased wellbeing and mental health. Humility involves acknowledging one's limitations, accepting feedback, and being open

to learning from others without excessive pride or arrogance. Humility helps buffer the effects of stress on wellbeing, leading to lower levels of stress and anxiety. Humble people are more open to feedback and willing to learn from their mistakes, leading to personal growth and development. Studies indicate that humility is associated with better mental health, including lower rates of depression and anxiety. Humble individuals are more likely to have a realistic understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, leading to greater self-awareness.

Integrity. Research indicates (Leimanis), (Gardiner), (Koehler), (Weziak-Bialowalska, et al) that integrity promotes wellbeing by fostering trust, reducing stress, enhancing job satisfaction, facilitating healthy relationships, and fostering a positive organizational culture where employees can thrive. Leaders with integrity act with authenticity and honesty by speaking the truth, presenting themselves in a genuine way with sincerity, showing no pretense, and taking responsibility for their own feelings and actions. Furthermore, studies link “strong moral character” with reduced risk for depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular disease.

Integrity is a steadfast commitment to moral and ethical principles, promoting personal and collective well-being. Upholding integrity is linked to increased self-esteem, life satisfaction, mental health, emotional stability, and workplace success. Living with integrity involves self-reflection, accountability, consistency, honesty and transparency, and ethical decision-making. Statistical studies indicate that policy makers and practitioners may consider the character strength of honesty and integrity as a factor for promoting healthy longevity, limiting risks of becoming physically inactive and reducing risk of physical and mental disease.



US Military Academy at West Point

Honesty. Research and studies (LE, et al), (Kelly), (Mindful Health Solutions) suggest that honesty significantly promotes wellbeing, both mental and physical. Honesty fosters trust and strong relationships: When you are honest, you build trust with others, leading to stronger relationships with friends, family, and colleagues. This trust is crucial for building healthy and supportive relationships, which are essential for wellbeing. Honesty reduces stress and anxiety, promotes self-esteem and self-acceptance, enhances mental and emotional wellbeing, improves physical health, and promotes openness and communication. However, there are situations in which being completely honest may result in hurting someone’s feelings, or in case of speaking truth to power, might bring retribution.

Trustworthiness. Research indicates (Helliwell, et al.), (Friedman), (Kogon) trustworthiness is strongly linked to improved well-being, both individually and within communities. Trust fosters a sense of safety and security, which is fundamental for mental and emotional well-being. When individuals trust others, they feel less anxious and more confident in their relationships and interactions. Trust promotes healthy relationships and social connections, contributes to better mental health outcomes, can improve physical health, is essential for building and maintaining healthy communities, is particularly relevant in healthcare settings and in the workplace. In summary, trustworthiness contributes to a greater sense of security, belonging, and well-being, both for individuals and communities.

Avoidance of Hyprocrisy. Hypocrisy is generally considered to have a negative correlation with overall life wellbeing. When people engage in hypocrisy, it can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and a sense of internal conflict as individuals grapple with the discrepancy between their stated beliefs and their actions. This can create a sense of unease and disharmony. Hypocrisy can damage relationships as individuals may be perceived as untrustworthy or dishonest. This can lead to strained relationships and social isolation. Hypocrisy is often viewed as a form of cognitive dissonance, where individuals hold conflicting beliefs or values, which can create psychological discomfort (Tryon), (Huppert), (Gais).

The Role of Social Influence and Community. Research shows (Mussaid, et al), (Dhiman) social influence can be very important in how individuals experience and respond to complex and challenging situations, and it can influence opinion formation and behavior. It is well known that an individual can be very creative in one environment, but very inhibited in another, depending on the social environment. Similarly, an individual can be very kind and empathetic in one situation or very judgmental and condescending in interactions in another situation depending on the social environment in each case. Peer groups can influence the formation of values and behaviors in adolescents. Extending this to entire countries, the social environment and values of a nation, as expressed, for example, through the norms of language, accepted behavior of leaders, and the role of religion and spirituality, this can influence the experience by individuals of good character and ethical behavior and also the sense of wellbeing.

Most of the evidence presented above is derived from studies of wellbeing in individuals that might result from attitudes, dispositions, and habits derived from good character and ethical behavior. However, there are similar correlations between these factors at the macro or societal level, too. Research shows (Auzoult and Mazilescu) that the social environment significantly impacts ethical behavior. Individuals are influenced by the norms, values, and expectations prevalent within their social circles, which can shape their perceptions of what is considered right or wrong. An illustration of the macro correlations is provided by comparing the list of the world's happiest countries (Happiest Countries in the World), determined by Gallup using their wellbeing index, with the list of the world's most corrupt countries, as determined by the Corruption Perceptions Index published annually by Transparency international (Corruption Perceptions index). It is striking that these rankings reveal an obvious inverse correlation across the globe between the happiest countries and the most corrupt countries. For example, Denmark and Finland are ranked at the top of the happiest countries by Gallup, and they are

also ranked as the least corrupt countries in the independent ranking by Transparency international.

One conclusion from this is that developing wellbeing in individuals is inherently linked to wellbeing in the social environment. It is very difficult to obtain wellbeing in individuals without a supportive social environment.

Observations and Conclusions. Reflecting on the evidence presented here, it is clear that several elements of good character and ethical behavior are well correlated with enhanced health and wellbeing of both individuals and of communities and society at large. These elements (and surely many others) may therefore be considered candidates for the design of learning experiences in higher education aimed at improving life-long wellbeing in college graduates. While the Coalition has thus far focused on the promotion of belonging, identity development, agency, and purpose as evidence-based learning expoeriences that are likely to provide enhanced wellbeing later in life (Busteed), (Spencer), the evidence here shows that there are many other examples of attitudes, dispositions, and habits that also correlate with long term wellbeing. This opens the door to investigate other learning experiences in higher education that may improve long-term wellbeing besides those currently embraced by the Coalition.

However, much remains to be determined. While there clearly are many new possible learning experiences (including combinations and permutations of the elements reviewed in this paper) that promise to enhance wellbeing, the magnitude of the impact of each of these—both immediate and long term—is as yet largely undetermined. For example, this paper has focused on good character and ethical behavior as important dimensions to wellbeing. But “character” is far more than a random list of general characteristics with no structure on how they might fit together or how much of each might be too much or too little in any circumstance (Brooks, et al). Some constructs may prove to be more effective than anything that we know about at this point, but others may prove insignificant in improving wellbeing later in life, depending on how they are defined, taught, and promoted. The only way to determine this is apparently through experimentation and assessment.

On the other hand, several institutions within the Coalition have been intensely developing learning experiences in the area of character and ethics for many years (Lamb, Brooks, and Brant). These include Wake Forest University whose Program for Leadership and Character is training faculty at dozens of universities to develop effective educational initiatives on their own campuses. The WFU program is based on seven pedagogical principles that are being adapted at other universities: (1) habituation through practice, (2) reflection on personal experience, (3) engagement with virtuous exemplars, (4) dialogue that increases virtue literacy, (5) awareness of situational variables, (6) moral reminders, and (7) friendships of mutual accountability (Lamb, Brant, and Brooks).

In addition, other universities in the Coalition with a religious foundation have long been focused on educational initiatives in this general area, including the Jesuit institutions of Georgetown University and Boston College, whose mission is centered on “character formation” of all students. Also, Belmont University is strongly focused on character formation and ethics, as well as St. Thomas University in Minnesota.

However, what is needed to guide this extensive work is validation that these educational experiences do indeed produce internalized habits and dispositions that result in good character and ethical behavior later in life, long after the college years—when put to the test in a career. So, rigorous long-term assessment is essential. It is far easier to teach students "about" ethics than it is to inspire them to "be" ethical for a lifetime.

It is our hope that faculty at many institutions will take the lead in developing pilot projects and experiments to explore these issues and share their findings broadly so everyone may learn what works best. This not only includes experimentation with the core ideas behind the experience, but also the pedagogical process used to implement them at scale in a variety of academic institutions. This will inevitably also involve research and experimentation in pedagogical innovation.

A Call to Action. Independent from the evidence that promoting good character and ethical behavior is correlated to lifelong wellbeing, there are indications that the cultural norms around character and ethics in higher education in the US are in decline. For example, although student run honor codes have long been shown to enhance levels of student honesty and integrity in academic assignments (McCabe and Trevino), (Miller), students at several of the nation's most respected colleges and universities are now calling for faculty members to proctor examinations to protect them from growing disregard for honor codes among their peers (McMurtrie).

The trend toward normalization of public narratives and discourse based on false and self-serving exaggerations, conspiracy theories, and politically-motivated intimidation has contributed to a decline in public trust in US institutions (Saad) and previously unthinkable tacit acceptance of doubts about the importance of the very concept of truth (Gawrylewsky), (Kakutani). Some universities began addressing this several years ago. For example, the University of Washington launched a popular course Calling Bullshit, which resulted in a book covering the principles of informed skepticism (Bergstrom and West) and the Center for an Informed Public at the university (and supported by the National Science Foundation). In countries like Finland, bordering Russia whose persistent efforts to use invasive online disinformation to neutralize political resistance, has led Finland to develop pre-emptive educational programs in K-12 to teach their citizens the importance of informed skepticism (Mackintosh and Kiernan), (Henley). The reality is that the absence of public outrage and the rise of highly polluted public sources of information and influence (largely prevalent on social media) places todays college students in a high-stakes competitive environment where the public standards for honesty and integrity have declined.

The most effective defense against such erosion of character and ethics in society is provided by strong and consistent attention to character formation in the young. Higher education can and should play a more direct role in promoting character formation as a component of education for all, as some institutions have long been doing.

Thus, in spite of the fact that other cultural influences (family, religion, and community) are better suited to address the issues of character development and ethical behavior, it now falls on higher education to do what it can to provide evidence-based learning experiences to help the next generation obtain the attitudes, dispositions, and habits they need to flourish in today's complex world. So, we hope that faculty members at universities of all kinds will embrace this need and explore appropriate learning experiences aimed at building good character and ethical

behavior into the next generation. This will not only benefit the students we have today, but the citizens and the workforce we have in the future—and, of course, our own children and grandchildren who are among them.

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