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# Cultivating Character with Curriculum: A Service Project

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Eastern Kentucky University

Cultivating Character with Curriculum: A Service Project

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By  
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## Cultivating Character with Curriculum: A Service Project

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Often misbranded as an imposition of morality or a form of “conversion therapy,” character education is intentionally designing instructional practices to foster the growth of specific character traits. This service project explored how explicit character education can be implemented in the modern classroom at three out of class academic preparatory sessions for low-income high school students who will be the first in their families to achieve a college degree. These sessions were conducted during the Eastern Kentucky University Upward Bound Programs monthly Saturday Academies. During each session, students received direct instruction and participated in experiential learning activities regarding a specific character trait. Each character trait was selected in conjunction with both the Upward Bound Program Mission, Vision, and Values Statement and research-proven values associated with success. While not technically academic, these traits are crucial for lifelong success and improve academic performance in high school students.

*Key words:* character, curriculum, education, service project, Upward Bound, first-generation college students, low-income students

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## **Introduction**

“Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education” (Strauss, 2014). Though composed by Martin Luther King Jr. nearly 60 years ago, this assertion addresses a facet of becoming a well-rounded human being typically ignored in modern, public school curriculum: character education. Often misbranded as an imposition of morality or a form of “conversion therapy,” character education is intentionally designing instructional practices to foster the growth of specific character traits. Typically, character education focuses on kindling lifelong learning and critical thinking, diligent and capable performance, social and emotional skills, ethical thinking, respectful and responsible moral “agency,” self-discipline, active citizenship, and spirituality (Smith, 2006). While not technically academic, these traits are crucial for lifelong success and are shown to improve academic performance in high school students (Smith, 2006). Because of the importance of character education in the lives of students, my thesis is a service project in which I designed three sessions of character education for the Eastern Kentucky University Upward Bound Program. My service is three-pronged:

1. An internship with the Eastern Kentucky University Upward Bound Program.
2. Research regarding character education and best teaching strategies.
3. Designing and implementing three sessions of character education at three separate Upward Bound Saturday Academies with elements of trauma-informed care.

This paper begins with a brief explanation of the Upward Bound Program, and the demographic it services. It then elaborates on the proven-effectiveness of character education, the academic foundation for the structure for all three sessions, and the and the integration of trauma-informed care into each session. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to detailing both the organization and content of each character education session, and its implications. Due to the breadth of presented content, this paper is organized into sections. It is suggested that all sections be read in the order that they are presented to promote clarity and cohesion.

## **Upward Bound Program**

The Upward Bound Program was established by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 as a component of the federally funded TRiO set. President Johnson established TRiO as an integral component of his War on Poverty, and geared his programs towards individuals from traditionally disadvantaged regions (Upward Bound 2017). Upward Bound specifically services high school students who will be the first in their families to graduate from college, and seventy-five percent of students serviced by the program live below the federal poverty line; these students are typically at an increased risk for lower academic achievement and poverty compared to their peers, and are less likely to earn a college degree (Upward Bound 2017). In fact, according to the *Washington Post* even though one-third of the college students in the United States are considered first-generation, only 40% of first-generation students will earn their degree within six years, compared to 55% of non-first-generation college students (Cardoza 2017). Upward Bound seeks to mitigate these disparities between first-generation and non-first-generation college students by equipping high schoolers who



will be first-generation college students with the skills and experiences necessary to succeed in college.

The Eastern Kentucky University Upward Bound Program currently services approximately 120 high school students from Casey, Estill, Jackson, Lee, Lincoln, Powell and Wolfe counties (Upward Bound, 2017). Each month, all 120 students convene at Eastern Kentucky University for a “Saturday Academy,” where students receive a variety of academic preparatory activities, including ACT prep, career spotlights, and cultural experiences free of charge. Students also participate in a six-week Summer Chautauqua, in which they simulate life as a college-student under the careful supervision of resident tutor advisors. Students engage in series of college tours and cultural experiences as part of their six-week “college experience” as well (Upward Bound, 2017). All experiences and activities are paid for by the Upward Bound Program, and are of no cost to the participants.

## **Character Education**

Character education forms the academic foundation for this project because of the long-term benefits associated with its inclusion in academic settings. According to education experts from *Education Digest*, character education is intentionally designing instructional practices to foster the growth of specific character traits (Brannon 2008). Common character education target areas include, “social and emotional skills, critical thinking, active citizenship and self-discipline” (Brannon 2008). Though character education may seem trivial, when fully implemented in public schools the long-lasting benefits are innumerable. Character education is proven to improve academic performance, improve student behavior, and mitigate behavioral disparities produced by poverty.

The most significant benefit associated with character education implementation is improved academic performance. In 2010, positive behavior psychologists published a study in Hawaii in which ten public elementary schools across three islands implemented character education intervention programs during the 2002-2003 and 2005-2006 school years; ten other elementary schools without character education intervention programs were used as a control group for the study (Snyder et. Al. 2010). All twenty elementary schools served comparable student populations. During the study, elementary students enrolled at the schools with character education programs received approximately 35 hours of character education per 35-week period; each lesson was 15 to 20 minutes long, and addressed topics such as “the relationship of thoughts, feelings, and actions...avoidance of harmful substances, decision-making skills, and creative thinking” (Snyder et. Al 2010). After the conclusion of the study, test data revealed that the second-grade students at schools with character education programs consistently scored two percent higher on nationwide math tests per year of implementation than students from schools without character education programs (Snyder et. Al. 2010). The results of this study demonstrate how character education can improve academic performance with relatively little disruption to standard content instruction. The benefits each school reaped from their character education programs greatly outweighed how much time teachers spent delivering character focused content. Therefore, this study proves that it is both feasible and beneficial for all public schools to adopt character education curriculum.

In addition to academic performance, character education also enhances student behavior. During the abovementioned Hawaiian study, administrators from schools with character education programs also witnessed significant reductions in absenteeism,

disciplinary action, and retention rates (Snyder et. Al). Not only did these schools experience a significant increase in academic performance, they also witnessed a significant improvement in overall student behavior. Similarly, Ridgewood Middle School in urban St. Louis noticed comparable results after successfully implementing a character education program in 2003. Over the course of three years, the school's administration experienced a 70% decrease in disciplinary referrals after implementing their character education program (*St. Louis Post* 2003). Both the Hawaiian study and the statistics reported by Ridgewood Middle School demonstrate the effectiveness of character education in improving student behavior, which in turn ultimately produces higher academic achievement.

Furthermore, character education mitigates the behavioral disparities between low-income students and their higher income peers. As social psychologist Dana Weiser explains, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are at an increased risk for displaying generally socially unacceptable behaviors simply due to circumstance (Weiser & Riggio 2010). According to Weiser, low-income students typically experience decreased parental involvement, and therefore may never be taught the characteristics and attributes deemed necessary for academic success at home (Weiser & Riggio 2010). As a result, low-income students may not be equipped with the skills needed to be successful in the classroom, and are at a distinct disadvantage compared to their higher-income peers. Character education rectifies this disparity by teaching all students the qualities and traits needed to be successful, which ultimately allows lower-income students to acquire the traits their higher income peers had been previously exposed to; essentially, character education evens the playing field for lower-income students. In addition, though higher income students may have been previously

exposed to these “success traits,” character education reinforces their importance and may serve as a “refresher.”

Despite the proven success of character education programs, controversy persists regarding how to include character education in a school system largely driven by standards-based teaching (Stiff-Williams 2010). It has become increasingly more difficult for educators to find the time to incorporate character education into their classrooms while also rushing to fulfill state-mandated content standards (Stiff-Williams 2010). Because of the pressing nature of content standards, character education has often fallen to the wayside. However, the Hawaiian study confirms that it is possible to successfully implement a character education program without detracting from content education. For the Hawaiian study, each school only dedicated a total of one hour per week to character education and experienced notable gains in academic performance and student behavior. Therefore, it is both possible and prudent for all schools to implement character education programs.

In addition to conflicts with standards-based teaching, opponents of character education have also questioned the moral legitimacy of teaching children and teenagers a set moral code. Opponents of character education have asserted that the set values necessary for academic success are largely subjective, and therefore cannot objectively be taught to young students (Bulach 2002). However, research conducted in Georgia has proven that parents, educators, and clergy across all grade levels agreed that all students should possess a certain degree of several character traits, including respect for others, self and property, honesty, cooperation, and self-control (Bulach 2002). Thus, because there is an agreed upon and researched set of character traits desired by most everyone, unbiased character education programs can be effectively implemented.

## Session Structure

Each session was designed in accordance with research-proven pedagogy and the Upward Bound Mission, Vision, and Values. First, each character focus was selected by cross-referencing the Upward Bound Mission, Vision, and Values statement and the abovementioned Bulach study. This project primarily centered on the “Growth” section of the Upward Bound Mission, Vision, and Values statement, which states: “We value the empowerment and personal development that results from challenging ourselves and from capitalizing on opportunities for creativity and adventure” (Upward Bound 2017). The facilitator then referenced the abovementioned Bulach study, which revealed that respect for others, self, and property, honesty, cooperation, and self-control were deemed necessary for success by parents, educators, and clergy across all grade levels in Georgia (Bulach 2002). Using both the Upward Bound “Growth” section, the Bulach study, and my own observations I chose the following character focuses for my sessions: eliminating distractions, communication, and honesty.

After choosing the character focus areas for all three sessions, the facilitator then determined the format for each session. A study administered in 2008 with National Board Certified elementary school teachers across the state of Illinois reported that modelling, incorporation of real-life situations, direct instruction, and the utilization of teachable moments were the most effective teaching methods for character instruction (Brannon 2008). Utilizing this research, the following format was used for all three sessions:

1. Experiential learning activity
2. Debrief

3. Direct instruction
4. Follow-up activity

Each session was conducted according to the above format. This consistency in formatting is a principle tenet of trauma-informed care.

The students in EKU's Upward Bound Program are from a collection of the poorest counties in our state: Casey, Estill, Jackson, Lee, Lincoln, Powell, and Wolfe. Therefore, the students Upward Bound serves are doubly disadvantaged; not only do the students have limited familial support regarding education, a large percentage of the students in the program must also combat certain traumas and stresses associated with poverty, such as food insecurity, unstable living conditions, and erratic parental support (Harden et. Al. 65). In addition, children of poverty are also at increased risk for academic failure. Because of the impact trauma has on academic achievement, it would be erroneous to ignore the major tenets of trauma-informed care. Thus, the following elements of trauma-informed care were integrated into each session:

- Consistent routine and pattern
- Activities that promote relationship building
- Building on students' individual interests
- Consistent expectations for all students (Brown 2017)

## Session 1

Character focus: Eliminating distractions

Date conducted: November 19, 2016

Experiential learning activity: Tank

For this activity, students were split into two teams. Each team then moved to opposite sides of the room. On either side of the room, an object sat in a cardboard box. Scattered between both teams in the middle of the room was a collection of Styrofoam balls, bean bags, and other round objects. Students were then asked to choose a partner amongst their teammates. After selecting their partner, each pair was given a blindfold and instructed to determine which person would be the “tank”—who would be blindfolded—and who would be the “driver.” It was then explained that each team was to secure the object from the opposing teams cardboard box, and return the object to their team’s cardboard box. Each driver was then tasked with guiding their tank, who would be blindfolded, using only verbal instructions to secure the object. However, drivers may also direct their tank to pick up the objects lying in the middle and throw them at the opposing team’s tanks. Once a tank was struck by the opposing team, both the hit tank and his/her driver was eliminated from the game; drivers could not block balls for their tanks. The first team to successfully bring the other teams object back to their own box without being hit won. Participants played three rounds to determine the ultimate winner. During each round, after three teams were eliminated the eliminated players were instructed to shout distracting instructions at the remaining tanks and drivers to further distract both tanks and drivers.

Debriefing questions:

- What did you just do?
- What did you like about the game?
- What did you dislike about the game?
- What would have made the game easier?
- What distracted you during the game?
- How did these distractions keep you from achieving your goal?
- Do you have distractions in your own life keeping you from achieving your goals?

Direct instruction: Video and note-taking guide.

Students viewed a summarized video of Stephen Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People." Students were also given a note-taking guide to complete as the video played. After the video ended, students were asked to respond to the following questions on the back of their paper:

1. List possible distractions in your own life that hurt your success (success in school, success in sports, successful friendships, etc.)
2. List possible strategies for eliminating or coping with your distractions.

Follow-up activity: Think-pair-share.

After answering the above questions independently, students were asked to pair up with the person sitting next to them and share their answers. After approximately 5-7 minutes' students were asked to volunteer to share their answers with the entire group. The entire group then discussed the practicality of proposed solutions to eliminating distractions in their life.



## Session 2

Character focus: Communication

Date conducted: December 3, 2016

Experiential learning activity: Tower building.

For this activity, students were divided into four teams of five and asked to separate into their teams. At the front of the room sat a table containing straws, glue, marshmallows, dry spaghetti sticks, and plastic cups. Students were informed that their goal was to build the tallest tower possible using the items on the table. However, they were not allowed to speak until further notice. The students were then released to begin constructing their towers. After approximately 3-5 minutes of complete silence, students were then informed that they could then speak, but the only word they were permitted to use was “dude.” After approximately 3-5 minutes of speaking only using “dude language,” students were informed that they could then use other words, but they must say “banana” after every word. Following 3-5 minutes of “banana language” students were permitted to speak without any restrictions for the next five minutes to finish their towers.

Debrief questions:

- What did you just do?
- What did you like about the game?
- What did you dislike about the game?
- What would have made the game easier?
- Which stage was easiest?

- Why was that stage easiest?
- How important was communication during this game?

Direct Instruction: Video and note-taking guide

Students viewed a Google Slides presentation conveying five tips to become better communicators. Throughout the presentation, students were asked to provide examples of how to integrate each tip into their own lives. Students also completed a note-taking guide during the presentation.

Follow-up activity: Yes-and-no question game

Students participated in the yes-and-no question game to practice effective communication. To play the game, two students were selected to “face-off” in the front of the auditorium. All students were then instructed that to play the game, each participant would ask their opponent an open-ended question. Their opponent would then respond with their own open-ended question within five seconds. If either participant asked a yes-or-no question or did not respond within five seconds, they lost the game and their opponent won. If the student won against their opponent, they maintained their position in the front of the room and another student would come forth and challenge them. Students played this game until the conclusion of our session.

## Session 3

Character focus: Honesty

Date conducted: January 28, 2017

Experiential learning activity: Relay games.

For this activity, students were divided into groups of five. Students were then tasked with completing two relay games. Each game, however, required students to behave dishonestly to win. For example, for the first game students stop in rows of 3 facing each other. With two fingers out, the facilitators placed a very thin dowel rod across all students' fingers. All students in the group then had to lower the dowel rod to the ground while maintaining constant contact with the dowel rod. The first team to do so won the relay. To be the first team to complete the challenge, the winning group of students only mostly maintained contact with the rod at all times as they lowered it to the ground, and did not admit that they only mostly followed the stipulations of the game. For the second relay, students were required to carry eight balloons through a chair maze without using their hands. All groups, including the winning group, used their hands to keep the balloons afloat when they believed that the facilitator was not watching.

Debriefing questions:

- What did you just do?
- What did you like about the game?
- What did you dislike about the game?
- What would have made the game easier?

- Did you have difficulty completing the relays?
- Did the rules make the relays easier or harder?
- Did you feel like you had to lie to win?

Direct instruction: Guided questions

Students first completed a set of guided discussion questions individually. We then reconvened as a group and students shared their responses aloud with the group. Throughout the student response period, the facilitator probed students' responses and asked students to elaborate on their responses. The guided questions were as follows:

1. What does it mean to be honest?
2. Do you think honesty is important? Why or why not?
3. Should you always be honest? Why or why not?

Follow-up activity: Jimmy Fallon's mystery bags

For this activity, two students were chosen per round. The two selected students sat opposite one another across a table with a heavy black table cloth. At each students' feet, the facilitator placed a bag containing a "mystery" object. Each student looked in their bag, but did not reveal to the crowd, nor their opponent, what was in the bag. The facilitator then randomly selected one of the dueling students, and said student then either told their opponent what was actually in their mystery bag, or lied about their bags contents. The opposing student then had to guess if the student was lying about their bags contents. If the student guessed correctly, they won and remained seated at the table. If they guessed incorrectly, they returned to their seat and another student assumed the losers position to face

off against the victor; the new opponent reused their predecessor's mystery bag if the contents had not yet been revealed. This game continued until all the mystery bags had been used.

## **Implications**

The model used in this project could be adapted for smaller-scale use in most modern classrooms. This model could also be utilized by civic organizations, afterschool programs, religious institutions, or any other setting in which the participants required specific character instruction. Overall, this is a highly flexible model that can be adapted to meet the needs of almost any facilitating body.

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