



The Department Chair: Leading the Charge to Build Student Character and Leaders



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Ken Scott

“Goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous, and both united form the noblest character.”

--- Samuel & John Phillips, Phillips Academy, 1778 ---

Perceptions or Reality: Does It Really Matter? As a chair for many years, I recall, fondly and otherwise, discussions with faculty in the department about the lack of character or leadership that some students demonstrated in the classroom. It was my job to listen intently and nod in agreement. For you see, when my colleagues were lamenting these deficiencies, I was not only consoling, I was being consoled. This is not to say that we serve a lost cause—not yet—but there is a need to circle the wagons of leadership at the chair level within our community colleges.

Let me cite the following examples for your consideration; it’s best to let these voices speak for themselves:

1. IBM’s *Unlocking the DNA of the Adaptable Workforce: The Global Human Capital Study 2008* noted that “companies are finding themselves with a leadership vacuum, with fewer individuals who have the knowledge and experience to guide others through necessary business transformations” (Ringo & MacDonald, 2008, p. 23);
2. In a report by the Boston Area Advanced Technological Education Connections (BATEC, 2007, p. 33), it was concluded: “The case for soft skills might appear to be open-and-shut, given industry’s strong endorsement. Paradoxically, despite the importance of employability skills, neither educators nor students appear to appreciate them as employers do.”;
3. In Flynn’s (2007) article, *The Coming Tsunami: Leadership Challenges for Community Colleges*, it was noted that “employers are the true customers of colleges because they are asked to invest in a product – the graduate. Employers repeatedly indicate that many new graduates lack the critical thinking, writing and problem solving skills needed in today’s workplace [emphasis added].”; and,
4. The Conference Board (2006, p. 10) analyzed research data that suggested the following: (www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf)
 - o The Workforce Readiness Report Card for new entrants with a high school diploma does not have a single item in the Excellence List. All 10 skills that a majority of employer respondents rate as “very important” to workforce success are on the Deficiency List;
 - o For two-year college-educated entrants, one “very important” applied skill—*Information Technology Application*—appears on the Excellence List while seven skills appear on the Deficiency List;
 - o Only for the four-year college-educated entrants to the workforce is the Excellence List longer than the Deficiency List on the Report Card.

If you refer back to the title of this section, I asked whether it really mattered if these issues were perceptions or reality. If students are viewed as not having the leadership or character skills to meet the demands of the corporate landscape, does it matter whether that is a perception or a reality? Does it matter if a headline from The National Association of Manufacturers (2005) reads: “*The looming workforce crisis: Preparing American workers for 21st century competition*”? Whether the crisis is perceived or real, the result is the same: employers view many students as ill prepared to meet the leadership and character needs of the business sector. Consequently, what is a department chair to do?

Start by asking questions. Can these issues be converted to measurable outcomes within the department? Can the department holistically shift its present paradigm to include leadership and character development in every course, lab, and team function within the plan of study? Is it possible to hold students accountable for learning how to be leaders of character and the successful practice therein? The more questions posed, the more the need to sift validity from the data. In fact, it has been said that “The question mark is an inverted plow, breaking up the hard soil of old belief and preparing for the new growth” (Alinsky, 1971). And department chairs are on the front lines to lead the proverbial paradigm shift.

Plowing Fertile Ground: The Mandate of the Chair. It’s been cited often, but Albert Einstein may have said it best: “The world we’ve made as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far creates problems that we cannot solve at the same level at which we created them.” To rethink the leadership and character problem, Sanford N. McDonnell (2008, p. 25) suggested that there is a solution to the crisis in America’s schools and colleges. This solution involves schools taking a leadership role in helping our young people to develop sound leadership and character, whereby they learn to do quality work on the job and strive for excellence in their lives. The crux of this argument is that “a high-quality character education program in schools produces young people who are both humane and smart.” McDonnell’s idea equates to fertile ground for plowing by department chairs.

Seven Things Department Chairs Can Do to Address the Shortfall of Student Leadership and Character.

1. Establish a departmental ideology that may be used as a focal point to structure activities in the department to include leadership and character development. One such ideology is: A popular sentiment wisely reminds us that all of us are smarter than one of us. The wisdom, common purpose, inclusivity, sense of community, and personal empowerment embedded in that statement are profound. Leadership is not something possessed by only a select few people in high positions. We are all involved in the leadership process, and we are all capable of being effective leaders. Through collaboration with others, you can make a difference from any place within the organization, whether as the titled leader or as an active member. (Komives, Lucas, and McMahon, 2007, p. x)
2. Move from an individual student success paradigm to a team approach to success. Include more teamwork in the classes. Use this approach to deepen the leadership and followership practice of students, inclusive of character building whereby student teams view the success of the team of more paramount importance than individual success. This approach builds character as members move from “self first” to “group first.” This shift ensures the success of each individual and the team; no one is left out of the process.
3. Educate departmental faculty in research findings, reports, and other materials pertinent to character building and leadership development. This informational process need not be a diatribe of Titanic proportions; simply proceed in bits and pieces and enable and support faculty in understanding the material to a level of direct instructional application specific to student leadership and character development.

4. Inform students of research. As a department chair, it is our responsibility to inform faculty, administration, the community—and students—of relevant information that impacts the college and the community. If students are made aware of these information sources, they are more likely to rise to the challenge and dig in to their own leadership and character development. Keeping students in the dark on issues that directly impact them is a sure recipe for reducing the alumni pool.
5. Post forums for stakeholders. Forums are both good and not so good. They can be abused by individuals who need improvement in their character, but they can also be incentives. This forum process is within the context of the learning college, whereby the forum allows postings from employers, community leaders, students, faculty, and so forth. This particular forum could easily be titled, "Open Support Forum on Leadership and Character Development of Students." These 'millennials' are an involved generation, so involve them in their own success; let them see postings from individuals who make policy and hiring decisions. What better way to give them first-hand exposure to leadership and character skills that are needed in the workforce. They will soon be entering the doorway of the world of work.
6. Encourage community service for faculty and students. I know the usual argument: We are too busy. Faculty members have many duties and committees, as well as family obligations; many students, as well, have duties, studies, and family obligations. What I speak of here is not to become the Mahatma Gandhi of your local community, but become an asset in something that causes you or your students to give of yourself. For example, consider programs such as *Partners in Education*, where you (or a student) help early readers to become proficient and avid readers. This is but one instance of character building. As department chair, you will easily be able to suggest many more community or college service programs for consideration.
7. Develop a vertical and horizontal impact. In the context of this discussion, vertical impact is a top-to-bottom impact within a department, whereas horizontal impact is across all departments within the college—and between colleges. In other words, collaborate with other chairs within the college and at other colleges to create an infrastructure of student leadership and character development. Beyond academic knowledge or technical skills, how profound a strategy would it be if community colleges—guided by department chairs—became the cutting edge in policy and practice to build character and leadership in every single student throughout the community college system?

The corporate world has made it known that it perceives students to be less than ready to handle the leadership and character challenges of today's extreme societal and business challenges. With these challenges in mind, there has never been a greater mandate for department chairs than to ensure that every effort is made to prepare students beyond academic or technical requirements. Granted, there are the problems with funding, increased enrollments and space limitations, lack of academic preparation of students, and a plethora of other issues. If we graduate students, who have skills that are noted as a global commodity, without the skills to lead or be trustworthy, what have we accomplished? I implore all department chairs to consider this as a pedagogical plea to become change agents in their respective departments; look to the needs of faculty and students; obtain funding; acquire equipment; and fully understand the relationship of character and leadership development for all students. It is that important.

Implications and Recommendations for Faculty Development. We all know that the workforce will look to our graduates for their employee needs. If the current perception is that graduates lack the leadership and character qualities to enable the corporate structure to meet its employee needs, community colleges have a responsibility to improve the level of leadership and character for students. The implication here is that simply training or educating students is no longer the only goal of education; the goal has been expanded to include a specific intent to build leaders *and* followers of character. Department chairs are critical-mass points of reference in this process. The leadership brought to this particular issue must be focused, evaluated, and woven into the fabric of the departmental operations most directly inclusive of instructional practices.

To department chairs: Faculty members have full schedules and committee and other assignments. How can we add leadership development or character building to their already heavy schedules? First, encourage teamwork as a primary method to teach students how to be leaders and infuse character building. Second, promote the leadership and character aspect as an investment in the future. Many of us may be within five, ten, or fifteen years of retirement. The students we teach and guide today will be the decision makers of the future. These leaders will make decisions which will impact us as we transition from the workforce to retirement. Third, collaborate with other faculty and chairs and determine how leadership and character can be included in every class at some level, whether the class is a general education class or a highly technical course. Finally, think of the possible outcomes that developing a leader of character may have in families, personal lives, and the nation. As Sanford McDonnell would remind us, "You just might be teaching the next U.S. president to be 'humane and smart'." To reiterate, department chairs are critical-mass points of leadership in this process.

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Ken Scott is Senior Instructor, Computer Information Systems, and Director, CISCO Regional Academy, H. Council Trenholm State Technical College.

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Posted by The League for Innovation in the Community College on 05/26/2009 at 3:45 PM | Categories: [Learning Abstracts](#) -

Comments

[Carol M](#) wrote on [05/27/09 6:02 PM](#)

My gosh, Ken Scott, this makes perfect sense and is such a "dah" moment that it's ingenious! Coming into education from corporate, only "we" thought we were where leaders were made - and you can see from the state of the Union how well we did! Since, sadly, "life skills" education (such as grooming) now starts in nursery schools instead of the home - it makes perfect sense that leadership exposure would also have to come from school experience. You have given me another facet to place my passion in my role as an educator. Thank you so much for bringing your awareness to light.

[Sandra Claveria](#) wrote on [05/28/09 11:30 AM](#)

American vested interest is only in the mind. We need to have the mind, heart and soul of our students to build character. Thank you for being a reminder to this nation that we need to build students to believe, behave and become the very best they can, and give them the tools they can use to become a person of character.