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Perceptions of Character Development at a Trade College: Triangulating Student, Alumni, Administrator, and Teacher Perspectives

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Higher education may be a setting wherein character is revealed or developed. The purpose of this study was to investigate stakeholders' perspectives about the processes involved in character development at a postsecondary institution with a trade and character education focus: Williamson College. The authors analyzed qualitative data from administrators, teachers, students, and alumni regarding their perceptions of the character development process at Williamson College and to ascertain which features of the context each group viewed as essential for character development. The authors then triangulated across sources to examine alignment in stakeholders' perceptions. Each stakeholder group identified two essential facets of Williamson College: (1) structure and discipline and (2) interpersonal relationships. The groups varied, however, on which aspects of these themes they highlighted. We discuss the implications of these findings for the Williamson College context as well as for the development, implementation, and evaluation of character-based models of higher education.

When asked to describe someone with “good character,” people may quickly point to attributes such as integrity, honesty, and helpfulness. However, character processes, or the way in which character develops, is a far more challenging concept. Indeed, there is an abundance of research on specific character attributes, or virtues (e.g., McGrath, 2015; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) but a relative absence of research on the processes of character development (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Less research exists on how character develops within diverse contexts. Identification of character development processes, and of how they are promoted in different environments, can provide information about how to structure contexts to facilitate character development. One key setting within which character may either be revealed and/or developed is institutions of higher education (e.g., Colby & Sullivan, 2008).

The missions of many U.S. postsecondary institutions contain references to promoting character (Colby & Sullivan, 2008), and such a focus may be particularly relevant for such institutions due to the developmental tasks facing most students, especially those of traditional college age (i.e., age 18 to 22 years). Most postsecondary students are transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood, a time when important identity development often takes place (Côté, 2009), and there is also potential for substantial moral growth (Colby, 2008; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Thus, higher education may be a particularly effective setting for promoting moral and character identity.

Accordingly, as part of a study of character development processes among young men in a specific character-relevant higher education context, the Williamson College of the Trades¹ (WC; Johnson et al., 2015), we conducted qualitative interviews and administered short-answer questionnaires to current WC stakeholders: students, teachers, administrators, and alumni. We sought to identify how members of each group thought about the character development process at WC and the features of the WC context that they perceived as responsible for that development. Through exploring the stakeholders' perspectives separately and together, we can begin to form precise hypotheses for how character develops among students in this context, and these ideas can be assessed for their fit with the longitudinal data that will be analyzed as part of the larger study on character development at the WC.

Appraising the perspectives of WC stakeholders is also pertinent to the theoretical perspective guiding our research on character development. We describe this theory, below, and explain how it may contribute to our understanding of character development in a postsecondary educational setting.

A Relational Developmental Systems Approach to Character Development

Lerner and Callina (2014) have presented a relational developmental systems (RDS) approach to studying character development. According to this approach, character develops through “a specific set of mutually beneficial relations that vary across time and . . . place, between person and context . . . and, in particular, between the individual and other individuals that comprise his or her context” (p. 323). Lerner and Callina (2014), as well as other researchers in the character development field, emphasize social interactions (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008), interpersonal relations (Nucci, 2001), and communal values such as welfare, justice, and rights (Berkowitz, 2012; Walker, 2013) as necessary for understanding character development. This approach to character and character development emphasizes mutually beneficial individual–individual relations within the individual↔context relationship (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Following this approach, we define *character* here as the set of attributes or virtues that are necessary for promoting positive individual↔context relations, and particularly, positive individual↔individual relations within a specific context.

As Lerner and Callina (2014) and others (e.g., Berkowitz, 2012; Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008) have also explained, because character development is a relational process, the nature of individual↔individual relationships (such as those between students and faculty) are

¹Williamson College of the Trades (formerly named the Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades) chose to be named in this article.

especially important for understanding how an individual's character develops within an institution such as WC. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine the perceptions of the individuals who are interacting with one another, as these perceptions of interpersonal relations are likely strongly related to an individual's character-related behavior, attitudes, and emotions vis-à-vis other stakeholders and the institution itself (Lerner, 2002).

An RDS approach also recognizes that character development takes place when the multiple levels of the individual's ecology are integrated (Lerner & Callina, 2014), and that in an effective character-based program or setting, understandings of the processes of character development are consistent throughout the setting (Lerner & Callina, 2014). As applied to character development at WC, it is also, therefore, important to identify how different stakeholders perceive character and character development in the WC context, and the extent to which these stakeholders' perspectives are commensurate with one another and, thus, present at multiple levels of the school ecology. When alignment exists among stakeholder groups in their perceptions of character, character development, and the processes that are related to it, the institution will likely be more successful in promoting such development (Colby, 2008).

Accordingly, in this investigation, we took an RDS approach to character development as we examined perceptions of character development across different levels of WC, including students, teachers, and administrators. We also sought to determine how much these perspectives were aligned and reflected the WC context or theory of change, described below.

Character Development Processes Within the Postsecondary Context

The perspective presented by Lerner and Callina (2014) provides an overarching framework within which to understand the character development approaches of particular programs or institutions. Berkowitz and Fekula (1999) developed a model specifically for enhancing character development within the postsecondary context. Their model involves several components that are consistent with Lerner and Callina's framework. These involve teaching about character, for example, one person instructing another about the developmental process; displaying character, that is, modeling the enactment of that process; demanding character, such that the context requires the enactment of character-relevant behaviors for adaptive exchanges; opportunities for developing character; and finally, the institution must provide opportunities for the individual to reflect on the person ⇌ context exchanges that are relevant for one's character development. Thus, students develop character attributes within a coordinated, integrated education system, and then reflect on what they have learned to internalize the ethics of that system (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999). Given the potential relevance of this approach to promoting character within a college setting, we examined the perspectives on character development processes, and associated contextual features, gathered from stakeholders at WC. Next, we describe the mission, structure, and theory of change of the WC to describe the setting of this investigation.

The Context of the Williamson College of the Trades

WC was founded in 1888 by Isaiah Vasant Williamson to provide a free education in the trades to financially disadvantaged young men (Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades [WS], 2013) with the mission of "preparing deserving young men to be useful and respected citizens."

WC accepts students who are age 17 to 19 years at entry, have received a high school diploma or Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED), and whose family incomes are at or below 250% of the U.S. poverty line (WS, 2013). The young men must be considered able bodied (due to the physical demands of the trades), in good health, unmarried and without children, and legal residents of the United States (WS, 2013). WC does not discriminate against applicants on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, or ethnic background, but as of this writing 82% of students are White (T. Wisneski, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

Students attend full time for 3 years and reside on campus during the week (WS, 2013). They pursue craftsman diplomas in carpentry and masonry or associates degrees in construction technology; horticulture, landscaping, and turf management; machine tool technology; paint and coatings technology; or power plant technology. Students take academic and trade-related classes. WC also emphasizes character development (specifically the attributes of faith, integrity, diligence, excellence, and service) through the design of the curriculum and features of residential life. These features include attendance at daily chapel service and flag-raising ceremonies, care and maintenance of the school buildings, and adherence to a stringent code of conduct, including a zero-tolerance policy banning the use of alcohol and drugs (faculty and staff also abstain from substance use when they are in front of students but are free to engage in legal substance use when they are in the privacy of their own homes).

WC has developed a theory of change that describes their educational model and its expected influence on students. It posits that if (1) healthy, able-bodied young men who are (2) intellectually and emotionally prepared, honest, frugal, entrepreneurial, temperate, and industrious; and who are given (3) a curriculum that educates them with the knowledge and skills needed to pursue a good mechanical trade; in the context of a school setting that (4) provides Judeo-Christian ethics and values; then (5) they will succeed in life (WS, 2013). Success is marked, according to this model, by participants becoming useful and respected members of society and dependable, honest, and productive workers.² WC also expects its graduates to develop a commitment to craftsmanship that will converge with a commitment to serve others.

The Current Study

We sought to apply the above-noted theoretical model of character development processes within institutions of higher education (Berkowitz & Fakula, 1999; Colby, 2008; Lerner & Callina, 2014) to better understand character development among students in the WC context. Accordingly, this investigation had three specific aims. We first examined the perspectives of students, alumni, teachers and administrators to better understand each group's views of character development processes at WC. Next, we explored these data to identify each group's perceived contributions to and experiences of these processes. Finally, we looked for convergence, or alignment, across each group's descriptions of character development processes, and of those WC features that were viewed as essential to these processes.

²Longitudinal analyses to test the WC theory of change are currently underway (see Johnson et al., 2015, for more information). Preliminary findings suggest that young men from WC scored higher than students from comparison schools on character attributes that the WC identifies as critical for their mission to produce successful young men (Johnson et al., 2015). The attributes on which young men from WC scored higher than students at comparison schools included diligence, faith, integrity, and service (Johnson et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2015).

METHOD

Our data are from the Assessment of Character (ACT) Study (see Johnson et al., 2015, for full details), which began in 2012 and was designed to evaluate WC's educational model. Here we report the methods that pertain to our four sources of data.

Participants

Participants included WC students, teachers, administrators, and alumni. Student participants were from the third wave of the ACT Study and included 24 seniors across each of the trades. Twenty students reported their age; they were age 21 years on average. Twenty-one students were White, and three were African American. Sixteen WC teachers participated, including instructors of academic (e.g., writing) classes and shop (e.g., painting) classes. On average, teachers had 23 years of experience. Five male administrators (e.g., deans) between ages 35 and 65 participated. Alumni participants included 96 men, from all trades, who graduated between 1963 and 2006, with a mean age of 51 years.

Procedure

Student Interviews

We conducted student interviews in March and April 2015. These interviewees were first recruited in the first wave of the ACT study, in August 2012 (see Johnson et al., 2015). Of the 30 students initially interviewed, 24 continued to attend WC as of March 2015 and participated in interviews; six others were either expelled or left of their own volition. Six research team members conducted the interviews. Interviews lasted for an average of an hour and participants were compensated with a \$50 gift card.

Alumni Questionnaires

We circulated a short-answer questionnaire electronically and through the mail to a random sample of 100 alumni who graduated between 5 and 60 years from when the ACT study began in 2012. WC administrators provided contact information for alumni as part of the ACT Study. Ninety-six alumni responded.

Teacher Questionnaires

We emailed a short-answer questionnaire to the 31 teachers at WC. Sixteen responded, for a response rate of 52%.

Administrator Interviews

Administrators participated in semistructured interviews at various points during the ACT study. We conducted these interviews throughout the study because new administrators were hired in the second year of the study.

Data Collection Instruments

Student Interviews

Each interviewer generally followed the same semistructured interview protocol, which included questions about students' experiences at WC, their goals for the future, and perceptions of how they had changed since they began their education. Data analysis focused on students' responses to two questions. The first focused explicitly on eliciting students' definitions and views of character, "What does character mean to you? Based on that definition, what kinds of character do you think you have? How would you describe your character?" The second question asked students to review a diagram depicting WC's theory of change, and to think through if and how this model reflected their development while at WC.

Alumni Questionnaire

The alumni questionnaire included background information and two short questions designed to elicit alumni's perspectives on character development at WC, "What aspect(s) of your experience at WC did you appreciate the most? How, if at all, has WC influenced you, as a person? How, if at all, has WC influenced your professional life?"

Administrator Interviews

Semistructured interviews included questions about their experiences at WC, and how they thought the WC experience influenced student development. For this analysis, we focused in particular on administrator responses to questions about how they believed WC influenced character development, how they (the administrators) contributed to students' character development, and challenges to promoting character among WC students.

Teacher Questionnaire

Teacher questions included their histories at WC and their views of character development. We analyzed responses to the following questions, "Does WC aim to influence students' personal development? What does WC do well? What could WC do better? In your work with students, do you try to influence their character? Please explain."

Data Analysis

The first and second authors conducted iterative thematic analyses (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) of each of the four types of data sources to address our first and second research aims (i.e., to examine perspectives of character development processes and to explore participants' experiences of and contributions to these processes). To address the third aim of identifying convergences and alignment in each stakeholder group's descriptions of character development at the WC, we employed facets of the constant comparison method (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and the triangulation method described by Farmer, Robinson, Elliott,

and Eyles (2006). We illustrate this iterative analysis process as it was applied to data primarily from teachers.

First and Second Research Aims

The first and second authors began thematically analyzing the teacher data by reviewing responses and developing initial codes representing core consistencies in descriptions of character development and the WC features that may promote it (Boyatzis, 1998). They kept analytic memos during their independent analyses to ensure they both stayed close to the data and to the research aims. For example, the first author reflected that “teachers seemed to believe the school is influencing students through its strict disciplinary program primarily.” Similarly, the second author identified “high accountability,” “rules,” and “rules are strictly enforced” as initial themes. They discussed their independent analyses until they came to 100% agreement about which themes and connections between themes (i.e., as laid out in memos) fit the data best.

The authors next examined teachers’ views of how they themselves might contribute to character development in students. They again discussed the themes and connections between themes until they agreed on those themes that were most prominent in the teacher data and relevant to addressing research questions regarding teachers’ views and contributions to character development. The first and second authors followed this process for each data source. In addition, when they identified new themes in another source of data (such as alumni responses), they added these themes to their overall list of themes and then returned to the previously analyzed data to see if these new themes were also present there. After going through each data source, the first and second authors identified salient themes, which they defined as themes that either recurred within and across data sources, or recurred only within one data source but were highly relevant to addressing the research aims (also see Buetow, 2010). For example, when examining the alumni data, the authors agreed that “teacher-student relationships” and “structure and discipline” were prominent themes in the data (as they were in teacher responses), but they developed additional themes of “WC values” and “the free quality of the Williamson school” because several alumni also indicated that these facets of their education were important to their character development ($n = 5$, and $n = 8$, respectively). The first and second authors then continued to revise, hone, and add themes, consistent with the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as they identified more data across sources that corresponded to previously identified salient themes. For example, the authors developed more nuanced themes related to teacher-student relationships in their analysis of alumni responses, such as “learning how to build relationships,” a theme that was present in 31 alumni responses.

Third Aim

To address our third aim—to explore convergence, or alignment, of stakeholder perspectives across the themes identified in the data sources—we employed facets of the constant comparison method (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and the triangulation method described by Farmer et al. (2006). Once we identified themes as salient within and across data sources, we presented them in a matrix to aid in the identification of convergences in perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As we decided on which themes to include in our matrix, we again reviewed the data excerpts to which themes corresponded within each data

source, and then across data sources (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through these matrix analyses, we identified two overarching and interrelated themes, and several prominent subthemes within each of them.

RESULTS

For our first aim, we found that two main components of the WC experience were present in each stakeholder group's descriptions of character development at WC: (1) the structure and discipline embedded in the curriculum and schedule, and (2) interpersonal relationships. We organize our findings by these main themes. For the second aim, we found that each group emphasized different aspects of these themes; we refer to these aspects as subthemes. To address our third aim, we provide reflections on the convergence among stakeholder perspectives.

Structure and Discipline and Their Relation to Character Development

All groups identified the structure and discipline at WC as an important component of character development. However, each group highlighted different aspects of this feature and/or connected it to different descriptions of character development processes. These subthemes, which further defined this component of WC and connected it to character development, were structure and rules as helpful and practical; accountability as core to character development; opportunities to promote and develop character; role modeling character; and dismissing students to maintain the culture of the school.

Structure and Rules as Helpful and Practical

We identified this theme in student, administrator, and alumni data. One student, highlighting the practicality of the rigid WC structure, explained, "the day, how long it is, and some of the rules obviously . . . it kind of gives you the idea of what having a job is going to be like." Administrators also emphasized the practical aspects of the WC. One noted, "Making a bed with hospital corners, it's not really that big a deal. But we're training guys to pay attention to detail." Alumni also described how the "structured day got [them] ready for real world expectations." These three participant groups, thus, made explicit connections between the highly structured environment—including the many rules students have to live by—and the sense of preparedness students would experience when they began their careers. These participants indicated their belief that the structure and discipline were good for them because these components molded them into disciplined and diligent workers who would continue to display such character "on the job."

Accountability as Core to Character Development

Accountability was described by all four groups as an essential component of character development at WC, and as one way in which the structure and discipline positively influenced students. Students described how being held accountable for their actions helped them get their work "out of the way so [they didn't] worry about it later on." Teachers echoed these descriptions and described their part in this process. One instructor said, "Encouragement, constantly

building them up to feel good about their successes as well as their failures, but realizing that sometimes they need to be reprimanded and held accountable . . . this too helps in their personal development.” Administrators also articulated the importance of accountability from their perspectives of having to enforce the rules and disciplinary structure through which students are held accountable, noting that “the rules are very strict and the consequences are, are pretty heavy, but, that’s the idea.” Finally, alumni commented on the significance and long-lasting influence of this accountability. One alumnus wrote, “responsibility and accountability are part of the [WC] experience . . . and become a standard for the [WC] graduates for a lifetime.” These data, thus, point to potential connections between “being held accountable” for one’s actions by teachers and administrators and students adopting accountability and responsibility as their own behavioral standards. In other words, these data point to the deeply interpersonal nature of students’ character development, at least insofar as accountability is concerned.

Opportunities to Develop Character

Teachers and students provided another link between the structure and discipline of WC and character development. Participants in these groups described how they contributed to the process of promoting and developing character. Both groups also described how developing character is built into the WC model and the training students receive. One instructor described the Power Plant Technology trade program, for example, as providing “a lot of opportunities to build character” because students “provide the campus with continued services and handle any situation that arises” (students in this program are responsible for operating the college’s power plant and maintaining its utilities). These data suggest that students are surrounded by teachers who model character for them and that students are learning about how to become a person of higher character, at least according to the WC model.

Role-Modeling Character

Although this subtheme also relates to the theme of interpersonal relationships, here we present those excerpts that reference discipline and structure more directly. This subtheme was present in teacher, administrator, and student data. Teachers and administrators described role modeling as central to their contributions to students’ character development. One teacher explained, “I set the example. [Students] said that they always look on their shoulders and there’s a little [me] sitting on their shoulder, telling them you better not. That’s what I want to be.” Another teacher explained that the WC “culture is one of ‘Do as I do.’ Faculty follow the rules as well as the students.” The teachers’ comments illustrated their perspective that faculty (successfully) model the disciplinary code to set an example for the students. Similarly, the administrators explained how “we really can’t be preaching one thing and practicing another” and that staff and faculty are “there to be an example, to be a role model to show them what right looks like.” Students also articulated their view that role modeling is an important part of character development at WC. One student shared how his teacher “cares for you like he’s your grandfather [and] wants you to be just like him.”

Dismissing Students to Maintain Culture of Character

This final subtheme was specific to the administrators, who emphasized that they felt that their mission was to do what's best for the school overall, which could include expelling students: "When a student is dragging down other students, potentially, by his behavior . . . It's a good thing to dismiss certain students who are only going to bring the school down and change who we are." Administrators may believe that expelling students, or routing students away from WC, benefits the school because these students are viewed as negatively influencing the character development of their peers. Moreover, these administrators may understand character development to be a group process to which all students contribute. It is also possible that administrators view their own contributions to character development at WC as related to maintaining an environment that fosters character development in students; as maintaining a level of "fit" between students and the WC context.

Reflections on Alignment of Stakeholder Perspectives Across Subthemes

All groups provided compelling descriptions of how WC's structure and discipline shapes character development; accountability was pointed to as the way this process works. This alignment among perspectives suggests that this part of the character development process at WC is most explicit and, perhaps, embraced most strongly. However, the subthemes demonstrate that each group spoke from their positions vis-à-vis WC. For example, though students and teachers illustrated the importance of opportunities to develop character, these groups described contributing to these character development processes in different ways: teachers facilitated opportunities for developing character, and students took up such opportunities. Teachers also viewed their contributions to students' character development as modeling character for them.

As another example, administrators were most clear about the need for dismissing students who "bring the school down." Instructors, students, and alumni did not speak about this feature of the WC disciplinary program perhaps because they did not agree with it, or because they were less concerned with the "bigger picture" of WC than were administrators (whose main task is implementing the WC mission). Nevertheless, that accountability (and, to a lesser extent, role modeling) was so prominently described as how the structure and disciplinary program at WC influences character suggests that at least some components of the WC theory of change are threaded throughout various levels of WC and understood and embraced by the various groups.

Interpersonal Relationships and Their Influence on Character Development

Consistent with the Lerner and Callina (2014) model of character development, which emphasizes mutually beneficial person↔person relations as a key component of character development processes, we identified interpersonal relationships as a primary theme. Interpersonal relationships were described across groups as central to the process of character development, with nuances (i.e., subthemes) in the descriptions of this aspect, and how it influences character, within and across groups. Specifically, all groups described aspects of this theme, but from different perspectives, which reflected differences in each stakeholder context. The subthemes—which represent these different perspectives on the main theme—include positive/caring student-teacher

relationships, “de facto parenting,” “brotherhood” as essential, teaching students to take care of each other, and community building and working with others.

Positive/Caring Teacher–Student Relationships

We identified this subtheme in the data from students, teachers, and alumni. Students described how the positive relationships they had with teachers helped them to learn about life and grow as young men. One student shared how his instructor “not only teaches us carpentry, he teaches us life lessons . . . if we ever had like—call it a father/son moment, father/son question—he’s able to help us.” Teachers also described how they bonded with students, in part, to influence their personal development (i.e., their character), as well as their development as tradesmen, “I try to influence [students] through my own life transparency lessons and by . . . demonstrating how much I value and care for them.” Alumni also frequently mentioned their “shop instructors and teachers that were dedicated to the students,” when asked what they appreciated most about the WC.

“De Facto Parenting”

This subtheme was also only present among administrators, who described how they, along with the teachers, sometimes take on a parental role. For example, one administrator described how “the faculty and staff all come alongside the students and encourage them” in order to help the students’ personal development. Another described how he believes WC socializes students in powerful ways, as if administrators and instructors were their “de facto parents” of WC students. These stakeholders suggest that they contribute to the process of character development by caring for students and holding them to high standards, but also by reprimanding them when needed, as parents would. These data suggest that a combination of strict rule setting and caring is essential to fostering character development in WC students. It is interesting to note that, though students, teachers, and alumni described the importance of caring student–teacher relationships, only administrators described these relationships specifically using the language of parenting.

Brotherhood as Essential

This subtheme was only present among students, who expressed the value of close relationships they had formed with their fellow WC students. When asked about his most meaningful WC experience, one student noted “the brotherhood,” explaining further that, “when someone’s falling down there’s someone right there to pick you up and that’s really important anywhere you go.” Other students focused on the scaffolding that’s embedded in peer relationships at WC, “[Seniors] pretty much set the bar. Whatever they tell you, you have to do, you don’t really have a choice . . . so it’s kind of passed down which really formed you, really forms respect and diligence definitely.” It is possible that having close relationships with peers, and participating in this scaffolding model, helps students learn to be humble about what they know, and to learn to take direction from their superiors. Given that team structures are frequently replicated when students graduate from WC and begin their trade careers, such skills could be vital to their success.

Teaching Students to Take Care of Each Other

The administrators also described peer–peer relationships as an important component of the WC experience, but their perspective also included ideas about how such relationships may relate to students’ character development. One administrator described the “positive peer pressure” students get from their relationships with one another to make it through the WC. Another administrator described relationships as teaching students “to take care of each other,” adding that “if they [students] can take care of themselves then they’ll be able to take care of someone else. That’s the essence of leadership.” Administrators, thus, indicated that relationships help students care for and lead others, and may provide incentives for surviving and thriving in the WC program. Thus, “teaching students to take care of each other” and “brotherhood as essential” also represented two perspectives on a similar idea (the importance of peer relationships).

Community Building and Working With Others

This subtheme was an important part of interpersonal relationships and was present in teacher, administrator, and alumni data. Teachers expressed that community building is essential because “the most important thing is they have to work together” while at the WC and in the future. Similarly, administrators noted the importance of creating opportunities for team building. One administrator described how “they work hard all day, but in the evenings, they have time to build that bond with their classmates.” Administrators and faculty appeared to believe that giving students the opportunity to build bonds and work together was vital to their success as tradesmen and as people and may be important to the WC’s character (and trade skill) development model. Alumni, reflecting back on their time at WC, also described the practical implications of community building and learning to work with others as part of their training. One alumnus explained that, “I graduated in the Power Plant trade and have worked in this trade since my graduation. It has helped me succeed in business and has improved my ability to work and direct others.” Another alumnus described how the WC “taught me how to deal with people both in the social and work areas.” One alumnus shared that “[WC] taught me to build walls but also to build relationships.”

Reflections on Alignment of Stakeholder Perspectives Across Subthemes

All three groups’ perspectives aligned in terms of mentioning positive/caring teacher–student relationships, which may illustrate that these relationships are a key and enduring feature of the WC experience. Although students’ reflections on their WC experiences lacked nuanced descriptions of the relational components of their training, it was a prominent feature of the alumni data. Many of the alumni detailed relationships and relationship skills in their responses about how WC influenced their personal and professional lives. This discrepancy suggests that students may not be as aware of these benefits until they graduate. Although students mentioned their relationships with teachers and the brotherhood they formed, for example, they did not connect these experiences to the structure of their shop classes, or to the positive experiences they were then able to have with coworkers, friends, and families. Nevertheless, that teachers, administrators, and alumni articulated the benefits of the relational components of WC suggests that interpersonal relationships, and relationship building skills, are powerful aspects of the WC model and critical to students’ character development. Moreover, these interpersonal relations

seem to strengthen the effectiveness (in regard to developing students' character) of the structure and discipline component of the WC experience.

DISCUSSION

Character development is included in the mission of many U.S. postsecondary institutions (Colby & Sullivan, 2008), yet more research is needed on how character actually develops within diverse higher education environments, including community colleges and trade and vocational schools. The Williamson College of the Trades is an interesting context for such research given its specific focus on character and character development. To frame this work, we drew from the RDS perspective (Lerner & Callina, 2014), which emphasizes mutually beneficial person↔context relations (and, more specifically, person↔person relations), and the integration of multiple levels of the ecology. When applied to understanding character development within a higher education context, this theory highlights the importance of alignment of perceptions of character development processes across different stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, administrators). Moreover, we intend to use information about stakeholders' perspectives to form precise hypotheses for how character develops among students as part of the larger study on character development at the WC.

We conducted the current investigation to explore perspectives from various groups about if and how WC influences students' character development. We also investigated to what extent group's understandings of these processes were similar and, thus, to what extent the character values at WC appear to be threaded through various levels of the context. We suggest this similarity would indicate alignment and integration among the various levels of the WC context (e.g., students, teachers, administrators). From an RDS perspective, positive development is promoted when such alignment and integration occurs.

Stakeholder Perspectives of Character Development at WC

All four groups identified the structure and discipline of WC, as well as components of interpersonal relationships formed there, as contributing to character development. Moreover, each group pointed to the core function of accountability. Each group's descriptions reflected an understanding that the WC model "works" in part because students are held to high ethical and educational standards, which prepares them for success in the trades. Instructors and administrators appear to contribute to this process by holding students to these high standards and holding themselves to similarly high standards, thereby modeling real-life accountability.

We also learned that each of these stakeholder groups believes that even as students are held to high standards, they are cared for and encouraged by their instructors, administrators (who serve as "de facto parents"), and by their peers. Alumni narratives in particular conveyed an understanding that this combination of discipline and caring shaped their lives at WC, but also ensured that they were equipped to excel in their trade (e.g., "build walls") and work positively and productively with others in their professional and personal lives (e.g., "build relationships"). These data suggest that WC enacts a model emphasizing a combination of structure, discipline, and caring relationships that may be successful at positively influencing students' trade skill development, and at least some components of their character development. We also note that this combination of characteristics—caring relationships with high expectations and demandingness—also

corresponds to the characteristics of effective parenting and youth–adult relationships identified in developmental science literature (e.g., Bowers, Johnson, Warren, Tirrell, & Lerner, 2015). Considerable research has demonstrated that such relationships have pervasive and long-lasting positive effects for children and adolescents (e.g., Bornstein, 2015), and so it is likely that these benefits extend to relationships between older and younger adults, especially in a setting such as the WC where the relationships between staff and students play such a prominent role.

Although stakeholder groups differed in the connections they articulated between these components of the WC context and character development, triangulating across their data enables us to formulate an explanation for how structure, discipline, and caring relationships may influence students' development. Perhaps most compelling are descriptions from alumni of how the structure of their shop training, and WC experience as a whole, influenced their ability to get along with and respect people. These data suggest that the nature of how students received their training in their trade, in particular, influenced these components of their development. For example, students and alumni referenced the hierarchy of their shop classes wherein older students instructed the younger students. Through this structure, students reportedly learned the value of respecting their leaders but also, later, learned how to be leaders themselves.

Moreover, participants described how they received strong but caring reprimands when they made mistakes, from both instructors and administrators. Students received reprimands for all kinds of errors, including failing to make their beds correctly, and when working in their shop classes. Instructors and administrators were clear that this disciplinary structure was put in place so students would get used to “paying attention to detail,” and thinking very carefully before acting (e.g., one instructor wanted his students to graduate from the WC and go through life thinking back to his reprimands and what he would say in a particular situation).

From across the different types of data sources, it seems that character development at WC involves integrating at least some of the WC values (e.g., excellence, diligence, integrity, and service) into students' experiences in their trades but also in other aspects of their lives. These values seem to be threaded through the training students receive, and manifest in their various interactions with peers, instructors, and administrators. Moreover, it appears that the character focus and the trade focus are deeply intertwined; students are held to high ethical standards in their classes and are expected to behave well and consistently reflect excellence, integrity, diligence, and service in their interactions with peers, instructors, and administrators.

Thus, we can overall conclude that, consistent with the RDS approach to character development (Lerner & Callina, 2014), such development relies on and occurs through interpersonal relationships that together support the context, and vice versa. Nevertheless, that students are dismissed from WC every year suggests that the WC model of character development is not easy to follow, and has the consequence of excluding certain students from it. We discuss the potential implications of Williamson's discipline policies on our findings in greater detail, below.

Moreover, the WC model may be difficult for other postsecondary institutions to implement if they desire to provide a trade and character development education to a wider range of students, including those students who may be challenged to abide by the strict structure and disciplinary code enforced at WC. It may be the case that the WC students who experience the most difficulty in abiding by the disciplinary code may also stand to gain the most from increasing their skills in that area. In this regard, it may be important for WC to reexamine some aspects of its structure and disciplinary program, at the very least, to avoid excluding those students who may have the most to gain from a free postsecondary institution.

Examining the WC Context in Relation to Berkowitz and Fekula's (1999) Model

Our results also suggest that WC reflects many, though not all, of the characteristics of high-quality character-focused postsecondary institutions, as described by Berkowitz and Fekula (1999). We have presented considerable evidence pointing to WC as a context that exhibits the features of displaying, demonstrating, and opportunities for developing character. According to Berkowitz and Fekula (1999), displaying character involves role-modeling and institutional policies that reflect the values of the institution. Role modeling was described as a core feature of instructors' and administrators' roles at the WC and interactions with students. Demanding character describes the need for an institution to set and enforce standards that demand performance and behavior from students that reflect the character values of the institution. WC is clearly an institution with strong demands on students' character, as evidenced by the emphasis of all stakeholders on the strong influence of structure and discipline on students' character development. Finally, students and instructors described the many ways in which students have opportunities to develop character. The requirements of Power Plant students to be responsible for electricity that powers the school is one example of such opportunities and how they are integrated into the WC curriculum.

However, there were also features of Berkowitz and Fekula's (1999) model that were not reflected in stakeholder's accounts. In particular, there were not many clear examples about how character was explicitly taught to students, and/or about the opportunities students had for reflecting on character. Reflection is a core component of the model described by Berkowitz & Fekula (1999), because it is believed that, through reflection, individuals internalize the ethics of their educational institution. Moreover, this kind of reflection is viewed as essential for engaging the agency and emotional commitment of young adults in meeting the goals of their school (Mascolo, 2014). Perhaps more opportunities for reflection would enable more WC students to weigh the consequences of following (or breaking) the WC rules, and eventually make it through their program. We also note, however, that just because participants did not mention opportunities for reflection does not mean they are not given these opportunities.

Limitations

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, we had to compare different types of qualitative data (i.e., interviews and responses to short-answer questions), with different degrees of depth. Using these different sources (with slightly different, but related, questions) made the process of triangulating across responses more challenging. Nevertheless, we were able to formulate an explanation about the features of WC that may contribute to character development, and how such features may promote character development.

Another limitation relates to the generalizability of our findings. Although our student sample was originally based on a random selection process, we were not able to include data from the six students who had left WC. Possible reasons for students leaving or being dismissed from WC include failing grades, violating the zero-tolerance policy on drug and alcohol use, committing a major violation of the disciplinary code (e.g., fighting), or accumulating too many disciplinary "points" for minor violations of the disciplinary code over the course of a school year (e.g., repeated instances of tardiness or disorderly appearance). Thus, our student data represent the students who remained through the entire 3-year experience; as is the case with nearly any

longitudinal study (see Phelps, Furstenburg, & Colby, 2002), it is possible that our findings were affected by an increasingly select sample over the course of the 3-year study. The perspectives of students who did not stay could have provided valuable information about how WC could be improved or why it may not have succeeded with all students. This data could potentially inform, for example, how the WC could better meet the needs of different kinds of students, including those who may require more time and scaffolding to adjust to a strict disciplinary code. Our teacher and administrator perspectives also were from individuals who elected to participate and may not represent all WC instructors and staff.

Finally, a limitation and strength of our study is the potentially singular nature of the WC context: studying the environment of this school and its possible impacts on students presents an interesting opportunity and a potential limitation to the generalizability of our findings to other samples. We have gained important information about the facets of one higher education institution that may facilitate character development among its students: (1) structure and discipline and (2) interpersonal relationships. Although the specific ways in which these facets are implemented within WC (e.g., a strict code of conduct, including standards for bed making) may not be feasible, or even desirable, at other institutions, we can conclude that the standards institutions set—regardless of what they are—can have an impact on students when they are consistently and rigorously enforced in the context of caring interpersonal relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

We have constructed a holistic understanding of the features of the WC context that are believed to most strongly influence character development, of how these features influence character; of how perspectives of stakeholders are aligned, and of what could be done to further enhance this important postsecondary context. In line with the RDS perspective (Lerner & Callina, 2014) framing this work, interpersonal relationships (i.e., between instructors and students, administrators and students, and peers) were essential to the WC model, and these relationships also have the effect of influencing students' development of an integrated notion of character: students become tradesman as well as people who embody the WC values of excellence, diligence, integrity, and service. We now have reason to believe that the structure and disciplinary program at WC, in combination with the care and support provided by teachers, administrators, and students, work together to enable students to succeed at physically “building walls,” and relationships, well into their futures.

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