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Thomas A. Wright
Fordham University, twright17@fordham.edu

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Distinguished Scholar Invited Essay: Reflections on the Role of Character in Business Education and Student Leadership Development

Thomas A. Wright[1]

Abstract

The study of character is a legitimate and beneficial topic for organizational analysis. Through the lens of character and character-based leadership, and incorporating the 3-H ("head," "heart," and "hands") approach to knowledge generation and dissemination, my reflections are provided to engage the *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* readership on how character can be used to provide our students as well as ourselves with a more meaningful business education experience.

I think one of the most important things I've gotten out of the class was a new ethical perspective. I've cheated before, and honestly who hasn't, and after our discussion. . . . I have a great deal of motivation to never cheat again.

—Anonymous student class evaluation

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, a number of our field's preeminent scholars and gatekeepers (Freeman, 1986; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Slocum, 1997) have commented that management and organizational research have often failed in providing a consistent value-added contribution to our primary stakeholders and constituents. Moreover, a growing number of social commentators have suggested that many of our social, political, and economic challenges are clearly associated with the decline in the development of character (Callahan, 2004; Hunter, 2000; Sennett, 1998). This is highly distressing as character plays a fundamental role in helping us better understand our core purpose or meaning across a wide spectrum of human activities and endeavors (Wright & Goodstein, 2007).

Consistent with this search for life's purpose or meaning, a number of management scholars have proposed that we return to our fundamental purpose of asking the questions that have a positive impact on not only ourselves but also the students that we teach, our schools of business, and also society at large (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013; Wright & Lauer, 2014). This search is all the more relevant when we

consider that many highly publicized unethical and illegal actions are being committed by the very students that we teach, society's future leaders (Wright, 2011). Sadly, the evidence is clear that this type of behavior starts early in our academic institutions (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001). The widespread nature of academic dishonesty at the collegiate level is evidenced by the following high-profile example of group student cheating at Harvard University.

One of the largest cheating incidents in recent memory in an Ivy League setting occurred at Harvard University during the spring semester 2012 in a Government class, ironically titled, "Introduction to Congress" (DeSantis, 2012). One hundred and twenty-five students, roughly half the class, were accused of collaborating on the spring take-home final exam, the last of four take-home exams. A teaching fellow noticed similarities across student responses while grading a subset of the exams. The teaching fellow alerted the professor in charge of the class, who in turn approached the college's Administrative Board that oversees student behavior. After dragging on with more than 6 months of deliberations, the evidence was quite clear-cut. More than half of the students investigated were found guilty of academic dishonesty and required to withdraw from Harvard for a period of time at the start of spring

[1]Fordham University, Bronx, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Thomas A. Wright, Fordham University, 441 East Fordham Rd, Hughes Hall, Rm 522, Bronx, NY 10458, USA.
Email: twright17@fordham.edu

semester 2013. Interestingly, in an attempt to be proactive, Harvard had introduced a voluntary freshman pledge the year before the mass cheating with the goal of upholding such basic values as "integrity, respect, and industry." According to an article in BostonGlobe.com (Carmichael, 2012), the pledge was vigorously ridiculed by a number of Harvard professors, with former Harvard College Dean Harry Lewis going so far as to call it "an act of public shaming."

The role of character is critical in the development of our own, as well as our students', search for life's meaning (Frankl, 1984). Focusing on the role of character, in both our teaching and research, four objectives are undertaken designed to highlight the importance of character and character leadership development in business education. First, a discussion of *why* character is relevant to business education assessment is provided though the 3-H ("head," "heart," and "hands") approach to student learning (Hill & Stewart, 1999; Stuebs, 2011). While many academics traditionally focus on the "head" approach, we need to also focus on how students affectively ("heart") and behaviorally ("hands") learn about character. Second, considered within the context of *what* is character, an overview of *how* I have assessed character is presented emphasizing my "top-5" profiles in character approach to both personal and professional leadership development (Wright & Quick, 2011). Third, building on Bandura's (1977) social learning model, I propose that a lack of positive role models constitutes one significant reason why we are today faced with such moral challenge in business education. My reflection closes with suggestions for the continued role of character education and research in both our classroom and beyond. A brief overview is provided next of *why* character is relevant to business education assessment.

Why Character Is Relevant to Business Education Assessment

We are increasingly seeing the grave consequences of the seemingly endless number of revelations of dishonest and fraudulent actions by our business and political leaders. Without question, both our financial and moral well-being have been severely tested. The response of many, especially among the young, has sadly been one of cynicism, denial, and avoidance (Wright, 2004). While well meaning, the collective response of business school ethics education has typically been limited to what can be termed the *head* approach to learning (Stuebs, 2011). Narrow in scope, the "head" approach focuses on better equipping our future leaders with the cognitive and intellectual competencies to make good judgments. Often grounded in the work of Kohlberg (1969), this approach is not sufficient in scope to adequately address the widespread problems in academic integrity.

The reflections presented to the *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* readership represent a distinct learning paradigm shift from traditional approaches. Informed by disparate influences such as Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, Cooley's (1902) looking glass self, the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola (Ganss, 1992), James Rest's (1986) "Four Morals" (e.g., sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character), and Plato's *Republic* (1991), the overarching goal of the integrative 3-H approach is both simple and straightforward. That is, to couple the traditional *head* approach to student cognitive ethical development with supplemental techniques designed to allow the *heart* (affective) and *hands* (the actual doing) learning approaches to work in unison toward leader character formation and development (Guthrie, 1997; Hill & Stewart, 1999; Stuebs, 2011). The 3-H approach takes on added meaning when one considers the changes in how our future leaders (our current students) interpret not only themselves but also the world around them.

Today's typical millennial student differs from past generations on a number of dimensions, including personality characteristics. For example, Westerman, Bergman, Bergman, and Daly (2012) demonstrated that millennial students are more narcissistic than previous generations, with business major students being more narcissistic than social science majors. More generally, Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog (2011) found that our emerging adults (ages 18-23 years) are morally confused when presented scenarios about what constitutes right from wrong. As a result, and consistent with my own classroom experiences, millennials are less likely to be interested in, as well as understand, story narratives that fail to include themes directly tied to their own personal experiences. Consistent with the 3-H approach, Plato had it right when he noted that the young should learn about character strengths through stories that first develop a love for what is good before acquiring discipline-specific knowledge (Meilaender, 1984).

Recent class discussions in my undergraduate *Principles of Management* and *Organizational Behavior* courses highlight this moral confusion. Students are assigned readings on various moral perspectives, including utilitarian, rights, justice, and virtue. We then engage in a class discussion of, and through incorporation of each of the ethical approaches, whether it is ever appropriate to lie, cheat, or steal. While fascinating, the results are disturbing. For example, when discussing the utilitarian approach ("greatest good for the greatest number"), all too many of our future leaders invariably confound the notion of society's greatest good with their own personal good. In particular, if it personally benefits them, it must be beneficial to society, and if it is not beneficial to society, as long as it benefits them, it does not really matter.

My previous pedagogical approach was not up to the task of addressing this student moral confusion. Relying

solely on the "head" approach, I would provide the following descriptive, general overview in each of my classes at the beginning of the semester. First, in the hope of generating student interest, I started out by noting that academic dishonesty has long been recognized as a problem in education and research (I would even refer the few interested students to primary sources such as Wright, 2004). I then provided widespread research evidence clearly demonstrating that more and more students are currently engaging in cheating and other academically dishonest behaviors (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001; Wright & Lauer, 2013).

For example, to put the problem in historical perspective, I would note that in one of the first published studies on cheating, Drake (1941) reported a student cheating rate of 23%. Next, I emphasized that this percentage has continuously increased over time. So much that today student cheating at rates of upwards to 80% have been obtained (cf., Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001; Wright, 2004). Finally, I confirmed that these numbers closely mirror those reported to me by my former students, with up to 88% of my junior-/senior-level undergraduate management major students assessed in one sample admitting that they cheat (Wright, 2011). To further support my contention, I would also state that even more troubling, the modal response for how often my students cheated was 100-plus times. These dismal statistics have prompted many academics to question whether we as business professors have somehow contributed to this cheating epidemic and the resultant crisis in character-based leadership (Wright & Lauer, 2013).

Since I focused exclusively on the dissemination of the extant body of knowledge (the "head" approach), my attempts to motivate students to consider the benefits of not cheating met with mixed success. The failure to include narrative stories and assessment tools that related directly to my students and their particular experience all but guaranteed the ineffectiveness of my descriptive approach. For many students today, the choice to lie, cheat, or steal has simply become a matter of personal choice, one that depends on the "context" in which the student finds themselves. The key question has evolved to calculations of the probability that they will get caught, not on the moral consequences of cheating and future blights on their reputation (Wright & Lauer, 2013). These types of responses are indicative that many millennial students have altered and refined many aspects of the traditional student–professor model of what constitutes a fair social exchange.

Toward a Revised Model of Social Exchange

While there is plenty of blame to go around, a number of academics suggest the changes in the so-called "implicit or informal curriculums" that we teach as one possible cause (Caza & Brower, in press). Consistent with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Wright, 2003), a basic consideration of the student learning experience for many involves what constitutes a just or fair exchange. Furthermore, and over time, many of our students have reassessed what constitutes a just or equitable exchange, resulting in a collective view that is increasingly different from previous generations of students. One significant shift, labeled by some the consumer metaphor (Zell, 2001), represents an attempt to reduce the widespread spectrum of human endeavor, including the decision of whether or not to lie, cheat, or steal, to the mere status of an economic good or commodity.

Students increasingly have come to consider themselves as customers purchasing a service or commodity from a business (in this case the university; Gross & Hogler, 2005). From a customer perspective, it is very easy to rationalize reasons that condone cheating. For instance, when I mention how many students admit to cheating, students are quick to interpret that this is not really cheating because "they are paying for a service." My classroom use of Nobel laureate Gary Becker's (1974) work on the economic study of crime provides confirmation of the changing view of what constitutes a fair classroom exchange for many of our future leaders.

Incorporating a traditional utilitarian approach, Becker (1974) provided comparisons of the expected costs and benefits of criminal behavior. While highly informative, Becker's analysis had one unintended consequence for many of my students. Given the high probability of criminal "success" ("I won't get caught"), classroom discussions clearly indicate that many consider it an act of foolishness to not engage in a high-benefit crime associated with a low-expected cost. As previously discussed (Wright & Lauer, 2013), it appears that my student response is not atypical as evidenced by the recent Bloomberg blog by the noted University of Chicago finance professor Luigi Zingales (2012).

Zingales (2012) noted that he found many University of Chicago business students to be remarkably amoral. As a result, Zingales concluded that many students interpret Becker's descriptive model of crime as prescriptive. Zingales supports the view that too many of our future leaders consider any failure to commit a high-benefit crime associated with a low-expected cost as an indication of not acting in a rational manner. Giacalone and Promislo (2013) suggest an even more troubling and extreme explanation, which they termed the *stigmatization of goodness*. According to their thesis, more and more of our students are not only themselves becoming morally bankrupt (willing to lie, cheat, or steal) but also disparaging of those students seen as living moral lives (in this case those not willing to cheat). My classroom use of the plight of real-life Good Samaritan motorist, Melvin Kiser, provides support for Giacalone and Promislo's premise.

Mr. Kiser was driving in his car in Columbus, Ohio, when money bags containing roughly $2,000,000 in cash

fell out of an armored truck. Dozens of motorists immediately stopped, including Mr. Kiser, and madly scrambled about picking up the loose cash. Mr. Kiser was able to pick up $57,670 in completely untraceable cash. However, unlike the vast majority of motorists, Mr. Kiser voluntarily returned the money. Consistent with Giacalone and Promislo's (2013) thesis, approval of Mr. Kiser's display of character met with much disproval. In fact, while his mother told him that she was proud of him; his father had a vastly different viewpoint. His father went so far as to tell Melvin that he had raised him better than this and Melvin should have kept the money and not turned it in. One of his coworkers asked him how in the world could he have returned the money as it "was a gift from God and you gave it back" (for a further discussion, see Dougherty, 1987; Wright & Lauer, 2013).

Melvin's "plight" always draws spirited discussion in my class. Invariably, the consensus is that Melvin's personal financial situation (i.e., the "context") should be the determining factor in deciding whether he should have given back the money. If Melvin needs the money, he should keep it. If he does not need the money, it would be a nice gesture to give it back, but it should be left up to Melvin to decide what he prefers to do. This "personal choice" preference recommendation forms the basis for what many students state they would do. That is, if they needed the money, they would keep it if they could get away with it. Some students would consider returning the money if there was a large or "fair" reward offered. Most of Melvin's fellow motorists apparently felt the same way as only about $100,000 (including Melvin's $57,670) out of the $2,000,000 was voluntarily returned (another $500,000 was recovered at the scene by police and the armored car employees). Melvin's plight provides one clear-cut explanation for this troubling cynical student attitude, the lack of positive role models.

While we often give lip service in our classes to the supposed benefits of not cheating ("Do as I Say"), we do not always provide role model guidance through our own behaviors ("Do as I Do"). In fact, we often provide our students with ample testimony of the "benefits" of behaving in a self-serving manner when confronted with ethical dilemmas. Students with whom I discuss the Harvard University example express genuine surprise when they learn that students were required to withdraw from school for a period of time. After all, this was a take-home exam and the exam itself was graded by a teaching fellow, not the actual class professor. In the context of a revised social contract perception of what constitutes a fair exchange, students consistently rationalize that cheating behavior is understandable, and even acceptable, when professors do not care enough about the quality of student work and the integrity of the process to grade the exams themselves. And, after all, student tuition pays faculty salaries.

In point of fact, many academics are far from proactive regarding their approach to dealing with cheating behavior in their classes with many not even formally addressing the topic, implying that "If we don't talk about it, it doesn't exist." For example, while employed at the University of Nevada, Reno, I conducted a brief survey assessment and found that roughly 50% of the full-time faculty in the College of Business Administration's Department of Managerial Sciences made absolutely no reference to academic dishonesty in their then current syllabus. The first step in any successful intervention must be to make all stakeholders both aware and willing to address the problem.

Finally, who can forget the blog post of NYU Stern School of Business professor Panagiotis Ipeirotis, headlined "Why I will never pursue cheating again." As reported by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Parry, 2011) and Wright and Lauer (2013), the widely read blog quickly drew hundreds of thousands of readers in which Professor Ipeirotis vowed to never again investigate cheating because he paid a consequential price for "doing the right thing" and actively pursuing student cheaters. According to Ipeirotis, his students became increasingly resentful toward him, gave him low teaching evaluations, resulting in his receiving his smallest ever raise. One positive when discussing the Gary Becker, Kiser, and Ipeirotis examples is that students are challenged to use not only their head but also their heart. In particular, the Kiser example has generated some meaningful classroom discussion, especially when students are asked, "What would they do in a similar situation?"

We all pay a price when someone lies, cheats, or steals because this type of behavior does not simply end when our students graduate. For example, students who cheat in college are also more likely to cheat in other aspects of their lives (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001; Wright, 2004). Academic dishonesty has been linked to such dysfunctional workplace behaviors as petty theft and lying (Wright, 2011). Many job applicants are increasingly willing to misrepresent accomplishments on their resume. Callahan (2004) reported the results of a pre-employment screening study in which a highly disturbing 95% of college-age respondents reported a willingness to lie to get a job; 41% admitted to having already lied. The work suspension in February 2015 of *NBC's Nightly News* anchor and managing editor, Brian Williams, for misrepresenting news events highlights the serious consequences of actual job dishonesty.

The willingness to lie and cheat is a global phenomenon (Wilhelm, 2010). In a study of Beijing high school students headed for the United States, Bartlett and Fischer (2011) reported findings that 90% of the student applicants submit false recommendations, 70% get others to write their personal essays, and 50% forged their high school documents. That probably explains why so many Chinese students with high Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores

often have a very difficult time actually communicating in English.

Highly relevant to our discussion of character, it has been posited that ethically acting students are less likely to engage in unethical workplace behavior (Wright, 2004). The incorporation of the topic of character and character formation into my management courses has resulted in strong anecdotal testimony from my student evaluations (and out of class discussions as well) attesting to the benefits associated with the teaching of character. The topic of character presents a number of challenges, not the least of which involves just what *is* character (Quick & Wright, 2011; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). Providing an adequate definition of character is no small achievement given that a number of supposedly related terms, including virtue, values, personality, and themes, are often used interchangeably. As a result, and unfortunately, these terms have often been confounded in the literature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wright & Lauer, 2013). With that caveat, a brief discussion of how character has traditionally been considered is provided next.

Character Defined

Traditional viewpoints of character have a number of sources. Aristotelian thought; Judeo-Christian beliefs such as faith, hope, and charity; the Confucian tenets of *jen, yi, li, zhi*, and *xin*; the Lakota Sioux strengths of bravery, fortitude, generosity, and wisdom; as well as by the more modern, secular approaches proposed by utilitarian, justice, and social contract models are some of the more prominent examples (Hunter, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Quick, 2011). Benjamin Franklin's (1791/1994) highly popular framework of strengths of character and virtue supporting the merits of being temperate, silent, ordered, resolute, frugal, humble, moderate, tranquil, chaste, industrious, sincere, clean, and just has long provided the mission justification for organizations such as the YMCA and the Boy and Girl Scouts of America. Considered together, traditional definitions of character invariably are composed of both moral *and* social dimensions. As a consequence, character is best considered as a multidimensional construct (Peterson & Park, 2006; Wright, 2011).

Hunter (2000) lists three core character components: *moral discipline, moral attachment*, and *moral autonomy.* An individual exhibits moral discipline if he or she is able to habitually temper their personal appetites to the needs of the "greater societal good" whether considered at the group, organization, or societal level (Wright & Wefald, 2012). For example, in class I highlight both the need and willingness of successful entrepreneurs to make significant sacrifices in their personal lives for the betterment of their organization. World-class athlete, highly successful entrepreneur, and professional screen actor in popular movies such as *Running Man, Twins*, and *The Concorde . . . Airport '79*, Gus Rethwisch is one example used to highlight this need to be highly disciplined. Among other discussion points, students are universally amazed to learn that Rethwisch did not take a day off from work in over 10 years to help ensure the success of his entrepreneurial dream as CEO of The World Association of Bench and Dead Lifters (WABDL). With dues-paying members from virtually every state and approximately 30 foreign countries, WABDL is truly a successful venture in the high-pressure world of competitive powerlifting.

Highly compatible with this communitarian idea of a greater societal good is *moral attachment*, the second element of character. Moral attachment is reflective of the confirmation of our commitments to someone or something greater than us (Wright & Goodstein, 2007). Hunter (2000) well describes this as "the embrace of an ideal that attracts us, draws us, animates us, and inspires us" (p. 16). Many students clearly recognize how universities have increasingly incorporated the concept of "family" with the goal of helping various stakeholders to form a sense of attachment (Wright & Wefald, 2012).

The third component of character is *moral autonomy*. An individual exhibits moral autonomy if she or he has the capacity to freely make ethical decisions (Hunter, 2000; Wright & Huang, 2008). Autonomy means that a person has both the necessary discretion *and* the skills of judgment at their disposal to freely act morally. In particular, moral autonomy suggests the dual notions of individual responsibility and free will (Hunter, 2000; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). The interactive classroom use of my "delayed integrity" case interview with one of my former students who voluntarily admitted to "successfully" cheating (not getting caught) clearly highlights these three components of character (Wright, 2004). After experiencing extreme distress after he cheated, the student turned himself in to me. His rationale was that he considered me to be a positive role influence along with his desire to be a positive role model to his daughter as a single parent (moral attachment). The result was that he freely vowed to never cheat in the future (moral autonomy). When I followed-up with him later that year, he stated that he had not subsequently cheated (moral discipline).

Distinguishable from values (Gentile, 2010; Wright & Quick, 2011) and personality (Wright & Lauer, 2013), character is shaped by one's convictions and is best evidenced by the ability to persist in those convictions in the face of temptation or challenge (Hunter, 2000). Building on these three dimensions, my colleagues and I have defined character as those interpenetrable and habitual qualities within individuals, and applicable to organizations that both constrain and lead them to desire and pursue personal and societal good (Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Lauer, 2013). As discussed below and consistent with the 3-H approach to

pedagogy, my students actively participate in my "profiles in character" framework of character-based leadership.

Incorporating aspects of each of the three moral components, a character-based leader can be most appropriately viewed as an agent for moral change. To that end, a character-based leader is one with the requisite self-control (moral discipline) to selflessly act on their own volition (moral autonomy) to inspire, build, sustain, and transform the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of not only themselves but also their subordinates. Best viewed as providing an overarching moral compass, the character-based leader has the necessary prerequisites of strengths of character such as perspective, courage, perseverance, integrity, and self-regulation to continuously strive to move their group, team, or organization beyond narrow, self-interest pursuits toward the attainment of common good goals (moral attachment). Classroom discussions have suggested John Wooden, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa as prominent examples of character-based leaders.

The Assessment of Character

Perhaps the most widely known and used classification framework for measuring purported strengths of character is Peterson and Seligman's (2004) *Values-In-Action-Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS). In an exhaustive investigation, these researchers and their colleagues (Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) identified six core virtues (with the strengths of character common to each virtue listed in parentheses): wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, critical-thinking, love of learning, perspective), courage (bravery, integrity, perseverance, zest), humanity (kindness, love, social intelligence), justice (fairness, leadership, citizenship), temperance (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-control), and transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality) that potentially appear to transcend both time and culture.

The VIA-IS is a 240-item self-report questionnaire that uses 5-point Likert-type scales to measure the degree to which respondents endorse strength-relevant statements about themselves (1 = *very much unlike me* through 5 = *very much like me*). Each of the 24 strengths of character measured by the VIA-IS is assessed with 10 items. For example, sample items of the character strength *kindness* include "I have voluntarily helped a neighbor in the last month" and "I am rarely as excited about the good fortune of others as I am about my own" (reverse scored); sample items for the character strength *prudence* include "I avoid activities that are physically dangerous" and "I sometimes make poor choices in friendships and relationships" (reverse scored). Responses are averaged within scales, with higher numbers reflecting more of the strength.

While providing an excellent backdrop for my class exercises and discussion, additional scholarly research on the VIA is needed to determine if the scales have adequate internal consistency (Cronbach alpha coefficients > .70), content and construct validity. In addition, while each of the VIA's 24 strengths can certainly be considered as positive traits, talents, or attributes, all do not fulfill the moral component criterion. For example, social intelligence, humor, curiosity, creativity, and zest are lacking in a moral dimension as traditionally understood. In particular, unlike strengths such as kindness and gratitude, someone gifted with social intelligence could use this attribute for either good or bad in their interactions with others. One potentially promising avenue for the classroom investigation of character and character assessment can be found in what I call "profiles in leader character" (Wright, 2011).

Profiles in Leader Character

Over the last 10 years, I have assigned hundreds of my undergraduate- and graduate-level MBA students at the University of Nevada, Reno, Kansas State University, and Fordham University the task of completing the 240-item VIA questionnaire (Wright, 2011; Wright & Quick, 2011). After filling out the survey online (available at http://authentichappiness.org/), the students receive immediate feedback detailing their scores. Responses are averaged within scales, so that the respondents learn the relative (within subject) ranking of their 24 strengths of character. With their actual scores in hand, students engage in an often spirited exchange on the role of character on a number of topics, including the role of character in employee betterment, well-being, and performance.

Building on Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character taxonomy and incorporating a focus group approach, I have also developed a number of "top-5" signature strength profiles for success (from the population of all 24 VIA-IS strengths) that respondents (both MBA and undergraduate business students as well as actual business practitioners) consider to be the most beneficial in achieving success in a growing number of work occupations (Wright & Lauer, 2013; Wright & Quick, 2011). These include "top-5" leader profiles for occupations such as manager, college president, entrepreneur, nurse, athletic coach, sales/marketing, accountant, and politician, among others. As one example, the "top-5" character profile for leader success for an accountant includes prudence, integrity, industry, critical thinking, and valor. Along with accountant, a number of students express a career interest in the field of sales/marketing. A consistent top-5 signature strength leader profile for success emerges with zest consistently rated as the necessary top signature strength, followed by the strengths of character—social intelligence, creativity, humor, and curiosity.

Another potential career option that more and more students are seriously considering is that of entrepreneur. Incorporating input from both students and working adults,

class discussions regarding what constitutes the strengths of character for a successful entrepreneur have proven to be very enlightening. Wright and Quick (2011) defined entrepreneurs as "individuals who acquire or exhibit habitual traits, abilities and strengths of character utilized to effectively recognize opportunities, assume risks in a start-up business venture, and overcome obstacles" (p. 977). Entrepreneurs successfully incorporate new ideas and concepts, or bring existing ideas together in new ways. Signature strength optimal leader profiles for entrepreneurs include the following strengths: hope, curiosity, zest, industry, and self-regulation.

Some very interesting findings indicate that actual top-5 student signature strength profiles are consistently and significantly at variance from their proposed or ideal profiles. Germane to the present discussion, many students self-rate honesty as a top-5 strength of character. However, as noted earlier, student cheating is at an all-time high. My students rank social intelligence as being one of the top strengths necessary to be an effective manager. Similarly, love of learning is considered as one of the top-5 character strengths to be an effective business student. However, both of these strengths of character are actually among the least commonly self-reported as signature strengths by my students (Wright & Quick, 2011). In fact, in some undergraduate cohorts upwards of 30% of male students self-rank love of learning as their lowest (out of 24) strength of character. The irony of this finding is all too evident for many academics. Similarly, business students self-rate themselves low in self-regulation and valor, strengths that are highly valued in a number of occupations.

Role Playing and Character Development

To address these inconsistencies, and adopting Bandura's social learning or modeling framework (Bandura, 1977) to the "head, heart, and hands" approach, students are encouraged to become more proactive and self-regulatory through the development of an agentic motivational perspective to character formation and development (Wright & Lauer, 2013). The underlying assumption of both Bandura's agentic and the 3-H approach to learning is that students become motivated to consider themselves as self-regulatory and self-reflective organisms, not just as passive beings reacting to influences from their environment. A number of social learning experience-based techniques have been used in my classes. Methods used include role-playing, the development of a character-based vocabulary, and identification of character role models.

One particularly useful role play, because it can be taught within the framework of the 3-H approach, involves having students identify (and incorporate) three aspects of

their life each morning ("Good Things") for which they are grateful (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The expression of gratitude has been shown to have multiple benefits. Grateful individuals are more likely to report being happier, energetic, helpful, empathic, and forgiving and less materialistic (Lyubomirsky, 2007). As a first step to encourage student commitment to incorporating the daily expression of gratitude, we discuss in class why gratitude is beneficial ("head" approach). Next, through class interaction and self-reflection, students come to recognize the association between gratitude and their self-worth, its role in their coping with stress and trauma, and that it can help in building and bettering social bonds ("heart" approach; Lyubomirsky, 2007). One way to incorporate the "hands" approach includes students actually expressing gratitude through the use of a gratitude journal. Gratitude can also be directly expressed to others via email, phone, letter, or through face-to-face interaction (Emmons, 2007).

Considered together, these "hands-on" experiential techniques can be effectively used to integrate a combined head, heart, and hands approach (Hill & Stewart, 1999; Stuebs, 2011). The key to successful implementation is that students are not only informed *what* character strength, in this case, gratitude, is beneficial to others ("head" approach), but also *why* it is important for them ("heart" approach) and *how* they can personally incorporate gratitude into their daily life routine ("hands" approach). I have considerable personal experience that simply telling students that the expression of gratitude works for others ("head" approach), including me, does not work for most students. The following are illustrative of the type of topical, real-life examples used to help animate and stimulate class discussion of actual character development ("hands").

Regarding the development of a character-based vocabulary, each in-class topic discussion and assignment makes explicit reference to character strengths such as "equity," "gratitude," "kindness," "hope," "industry," "integrity," and "valor." Informed by the work of Luthans and his colleagues and their use of micro-interventions in the development of PsyCap (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006; Luthans, Luthans, & Avey, 2014), students are engaged to "look in the mirror" and consider a time when they were at their best and reflect on the character strengths displayed. Consistent with the findings of Seligman et al. (2005), many students show substantial interest in these self-reflective exercises. An added reward is that a number of students report that the use of a "good" character vocabulary has an added positive benefit to their well-being. As evidenced next, students have also benefitted from the testimony of leaders from the fields of business, higher education, and sports when this testimony is incorporated in the context of their own life experiences.

Character Strength Development and Role Modeling

Incorporating the "top-5" character strengths profile format, interviews with a number of leaders from both the public and privates sectors, including university president, professional sportspersons and actors, and entrepreneurs, to name just a few, have provided further insights into character strengths and their role in fostering successful work and life endeavors. For example, former longtime Kansas State University president, Jon Wefald, completed the VIA instrument and discussed the role his top-5 strength profile (hope, humor, leadership, capacity to love and be loved, and fairness) had in his 23-years tenure (1986-2009) as a university president (Wright & Wefald, 2012). When discussing his leadership style, Wefald noted that the best descriptor was problem solver, enthusiastically noting that he might be one of the five greatest problem solvers of all-time and stated that he is at his best when solving problems!

Reading engaging comments like this stimulate students to initially join the discussion, especially when Wefald acknowledged that modesty is not one of his top strengths. Once engaged to join the discussion, the likelihood that millennial students will actually apply the principles to themselves is increased through incorporation of role play ("heart" approach) and experiential exercises ("hands" approach). This use of actual top-5 character strength profiles for highly successful people like Wefald provides several benefits. First, it reinforces for students the relevance of identifying their top-5 signature strength profiles. Second, under the proper circumstances, use of positive role models can be an effective tool to demonstrate how one's strengths can be used in new and different ways to achieve success. The case of "delayed integrity" proves a highly informative look at both the strengths and challenges of role models in the teaching of character (Wright, 2004).

Role Modeling and the Case of Delayed Integrity

As academics, we typically have had all too many encounters with student cheating. The case of "delayed integrity" provides an interesting counterpoint (Wright, 2004). As previously discussed, a student actually turned himself in after successfully cheating (was not caught) on the class final exam. The case provides an important lesson on the meaning of character and is indicative that under certain circumstances, individuals will consider abandoning self-interest and do what is morally right (Wright & Lauer, 2014). In the past, I would use this example of delayed student integrity to inform my discussion of academic dishonesty ("head" approach). I assumed that because it had supplemented the head approach (the case write-up) with both a heart (the student's graphic description of his feeling

an "emotional wreck") and hands example (the student actually turning himself in to the instructor), it would similarly impact other students as well. It did not reach as many students as I had hoped. Fortunately, an additional classroom social learning experience afforded the opportunity for other students to become more proactive and self-regulatory ("hands" approach) regarding possible character formation and development.

In general, in all my classes, I typically reserve the right to give pop quizzes designed to stimulate student attentiveness to the assigned class readings. The delayed integrity article (Wright, 2004) was an assigned reading for two of my undergraduate *Principles of Management* classes during a recent semester. While I have often given pop quizzes, I incorporated a different pedagogical twist this time around. As always, I passed out the essay pop quiz at the beginning of class. I allotted students a specific amount of time. When the time period was finished, instead of immediately collecting the quizzes, I made the following announcement. "I give zeros for essay answers that are obviously made up. However, I will give partial credit to those who acknowledge that they did not read the assigned article." In the first class section, *after* I made this announcement, 26/35 students (74%) took me up on my offer and wrote that they did not read the assigned reading (even though they had already provided detailed answers to the question). Of particular interest, I noticed that one honest student wrote this *before* I made my announcement. Unlike his classmates, his explanation was that he could not write about academic integrity given that he had not read the assigned article.

In the second class section, which immediately followed the first section, a smaller percentage 17/33 (52%) wrote that they did not read the assigned article. During the next class session the following week, I provided the results to both sections and opened the class for discussion. There was hesitancy in the first class, so I turned to the student who had acknowledged of own his volition that he had not read the assigned article. When he publicly acknowledged this fact to the class, there was some animated discussion from several students. One student stated that in other classes, instructors often volunteer that even if students are totally unprepared for an essay exam, "They should just write down something so they can get partial credit . . ." One student in the first class later privately told me why fewer students in the second class felt the need to acknowledge that they did not read the assigned article and accept partial credit. She (and I assume other students) had communicated with friends in the second class section that there was going to be a pop quiz. As a consequence, a number of students undoubtedly skimmed the reading in the 15 minutes between classes. I gave the same quiz (I usually give different quizzes on the same day or quizzes on different days when I have multiple sections) to both sections to further test for this possibility.

This exercise afforded several students with the opportunity to become more proactive, and hopefully, more self-regulatory in the future. More specifically, even though the assigned topic involved student cheating, the majority of students were perfectly willing to attempt to answer a question for which they were totally unprepared. Obviously, while necessary, the reliance on the head approach ("Do as I Say") is not sufficient. It must be complemented with not only the heart ("Do as I Feel") but also the hands ("Do as I Do") approaches to learning. To that end, our pedagogy must be informed with ongoing role-playing and role-modeling techniques designed to motivate our students to consider themselves as not just passive beings blindly reacting to influences from aspects of their environment but also as self-regulatory and self-reflective organisms as well. Along with its many benefits, demonstrations of character can also have severe costs as shown in the following example.

Further Use of the Professor as Role Model

In his well-crafted 2010 Academy of Management Presidential Address, Walsh (2011) called for us to collectively step up and act courageously if we as business academics are going to make a positive difference in student betterment. The importance of "walking the talk" of character became very clear to the author and one of his graduate classes in *Organizational Behavior*. On receipt of my teaching evaluations, I was shocked to find that a large number of the completed student evaluation forms had been altered. An initial investigation by my then employer's teaching center confirmed that student evaluation forms had been altered. High ratings were erased and replaced with lower values. Given that each changed evaluation was from a high (good) to low (bad) evaluation, it was readily apparent to an objective observer that the author had no motive. Interviews with a number of class members indicated no student wrongdoing as well, with several students confirming that their evaluations were actually altered.

The question then became one of who was responsible. This type of data tampering constitutes a very serious offense and this form of behavior has consequential implications. Faculty promotion, tenure decisions, and raises are directly related to these evaluations. Federal grant opportunities for the host university are also negatively affected by these types of activities. Given the seriousness of the offense, the matter was taken directly to the University President's office. At first, the administration appeared to be troubled by this act of academic fraud. However, this attitude changed abruptly when the severe negative consequences of an open investigation were recognized. In agreement with research on whistleblowing (Near & Miceli, 1996), strong pressure was put on me to drop the investigation.

Research on whistleblowing has found that whistleblowers are often fired from their job, have trouble obtaining future employment, are harassed by colleagues at work, experience various forms of physical and emotional stress, and even consider suicide (Wright & Lauer, 2014). In addition, the harassment tends to be constant in nature and builds over time with the ultimate goal of wearing down the individual. Given these circumstances, what should I do? With student input and encouragement, I made the decision to continue and gave the story to the student newspaper. This decision to go public and seek justice was met with the escalation of retaliatory behavior from the organization, including the threat of job termination and character defamation. Over time, the continued assaults on my character adversely affected not only my physical and psychological health but also the health of close family members as well. Was it worth the high price paid? I teach the virtue of being a person of character to my students. To quit because of threats was hypocritical and unacceptable. While the situation was very traumatic, finding the courage and integrity from within to pursue the matter was a very powerful experience, one which provided me with a renewed sense of life meaning and purpose.

For Littman-Ovadia and Steger (2010), our meaning in life refers to "one's ability to perceive oneself and the world as worthwhile and valued, identify a unique niche, and establish a valued life purpose" (p. 420). Essential to how one performs in a time of crisis involves how defined is their sense of purpose or meaning. However, according to Frankl (1984), many of us are lacking in a sense of purpose and meaning. Considered in the context of this example, classroom discussions on what students consider their "meaning" in life has invariably resulted in high levels of student classroom interest, insight, and engagement. One consistent student insight to this narrative, fueled by their reflection of their own life experience, has been the realization that it is not always easy to do the right thing (an awareness of the "heart"). In fact, as accurately noted by the eminent psychologist Robert J. Sternberg (2011), it is often very hard to do the right thing. For many students, this awareness has positively influenced our discussion of a number of organizational topics, including informing their search for a future work setting congruent with their character strength leader profile (the "hands" approach).

When the story came out in the student newspaper (Strachman-Miller, 2011), a number of former and current students contacted me and expressed support. This was very gratifying to me. It was suggested that I create a learning module incorporating the 3-Hs (head, heart, and hands) for use in future class discussions on character. Consistent with these student discussions, the following lessons for effecting positive change have been learned:

Lesson 1: To effect change, assume ownership and take responsibility. As noted by Walsh (2011), if we as

professors are going to be positive role models, we have to be willing to step up and act courageously if we are going to make a positive difference. This was my opportunity to try and make a positive difference.

Lesson 2: To effect change, be prepared to pay a severe price for doing the right thing. When faced with the negative publicity from the college newspaper story, the university chose to escalate pressure tactics. This failure to take ownership is quite typical of toxically run organizations and consistent with the old adage, "If you don't like the message, shoot the messenger."

Lesson 3: To effect change, prepare for the unexpected. In this case, the student author of the University newspaper article, a graduating senior and Army veteran, was "advised" that he might be jeopardizing a future career in journalism by publishing the story and listening to me. My students shared my belief that there are better ways to thank our veterans for their patriotic service.

Lesson 4: To effect change, prepare to be shunned and have your reputation slandered. One colleague informed me that he was very mad at me for the student newspaper article. He did not question the facts, but he and others were mad at me because it "embarrassed" everyone. Others were simply afraid and avoided me.

Lesson 5: Watch your back. To "protect" the organization from negative publicity or scandal, organizations often recruit other members to do their dirty work and label whistleblowers as being dishonest, or even worse in order to dismiss their claims as those of a malcontent. As in this case, these individuals are often well rewarded for their behavior.

Lesson 6: When all is said and done, follow through and act. Our students deserve no less than to be educated in an environment that practices the strengths of character it preaches.

Summary Thoughts

This distinguished scholar essay opened with a quote from one of my students and "the new ethical perspective . . . to never cheat again . . ." learned from the 3-H experiential approach to learning (Hill & Stewart, 1999; Stuebs, 2011). The 3-H approach has certainly helped increase student awareness that it often takes courage to do the right thing. For many students, this awareness has positively influenced our class discussion on a wide range of organizational topics, including informing their search for a future work setting congruent with their character strength leader profile (the "hands" approach). So, where do we go from here?

Organizational scholars have long been fascinated with optimizing the level of fit between the employee and the organization (Wright & Lauer, 2014). This degree of compatibility between individual employees and their work has been formalized as Person-Environment (P-E) fit theory (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982). P-E theory proposes that the well-being of both the individual and organization is negatively affected when there is an incongruent fit between the characteristics or demands of the job and the characteristics of the employee (Joyce, Slocum, & Von Glinow, 1982). While numerous conceptualizations of fit have been suggested and investigated over the years, the roles of various employee psychological strengths have not received sufficient attention (Kelloway, Weigand, McKee, & Das, 2013; Luthans, 2002). When considered in the context of character strength profiles and the 3-H pedagogical approach, there are a number of topics within the domain of P-E fit theory that can inform both our teaching and research interests.

The examination of the "master" or "cardinal" strengths of character (and virtues) have consistently identified several strengths as being "elevated" or preeminent in nature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wright, 2014). Included among these elevated strengths are integrity, valor, critical-thinking (or wisdom), self-regulation, and industry. Preliminary work for the U.S. Army suggests a top-5 signature strength profile composed of these five preeminent strengths. Future research is now needed to examine the role played by these strengths of character in employee performance and individual betterment. An important research question involves whether (and if so, how) these strength profiles change as a function of time. That is, are strengths of character best considered as traits, trait-like, states, or state-like in nature? If strengths of character prove to be malleable and subject to change, how can the 3-H approach be optimally incorporated to help better facilitate meaningful change?

The study of "good" character provides an added classroom and research topic benefit as it is increasingly coming to be considered a defining feature for physical health and psychological well-being (Wright, 2014). For example, being industrious and persistent plays a positive role in the well-being of individuals with cancer (Ferrell, Smith, Cullinane, & Melancon, 2003) and HIV/AIDS (Goodman, Chesney, & Tipton, 1995). Expanding on these promising beginnings, future research is now needed to more fully investigate the theoretical basis for proposing relationships between the elevated strengths, as well as such strengths as kindness and gratitude, with such potential correlates as psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007), the Big-5 personality traits (Wright, 2014), job and life satisfaction (Peterson et al., 2009), core self-evaluations (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003), psychological well-being (Wright & Lauer, 2014), and various aspects of workplace achievement and accomplishment (Wright & Lauer, 2013). Obviously, character holds much promise for not only how we teach, but also what we research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biography

Thomas A. Wright is the Felix E. Larkin Distinguished Professor in Management at Fordham University's Gabelli School of Business. He received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. The highlight of his professional career has been publishing a number of articles on ethics with his father, Vincent P. Wright.