

Winter 2013

Creating and Assessing Campus Climates that Support Personal and Social Responsibility

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Creating and Assessing Campus Climates that Support Personal and Social Responsibility

Abstract

Over the past century, there have been several calls to infuse education for personal and social responsibility into the core of higher education. As early as 1937, and again in 1949, for example, professionals from the American Council on Education gathered to discuss the central tenets of higher education in the United States. Both groups of educators concluded that "the central purpose of higher education is the preservation, transmittal, and enrichment of culture by means of instruction, scholarly work, and scientific research" (ACE 1983, 17), but the document that emerged from the 1949 meeting suggested broadening the purpose of higher education to embrace several additional emphases and objectives. Among these new goals, which were adapted from the 1947 report of the President's Commission on Higher Education (the "Truman Commission"), three stand out:

- education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living
- education directly and explicitly for international understanding and cooperation
- education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and the administration of public affairs

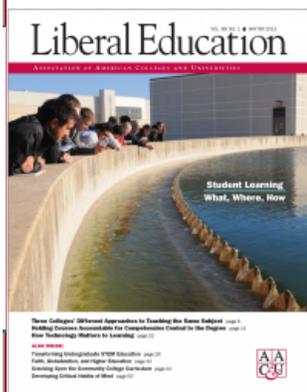
Both meetings produced documents that called on higher education to build campus environments that support individual students, while holding students accountable for their personal behaviors and for how those behaviors affect the larger community. In particular, the 1949 document stressed the importance of engaging with communities outside of the college campus. These early documents articulated the importance of educating students for both personal responsibility and social responsibility.

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This article is published as Reason, R. D. (2013, Winter). Creating and assessing campus climates that support personal and social responsibility. *Liberal Education*, 99(1). Posted with permission.



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Liberal Education

Creating and Assessing Campus Climates that Support Personal and Social Responsibility

By: Robert D. Reason

Over the past century, there have been several calls to infuse education for personal and social responsibility into the core of higher education. As early as 1937, and again in 1949, for example, professionals from the American Council on Education gathered to discuss the central tenets of higher education in the United States. Both groups of educators concluded that "the central purpose of higher education is the preservation, transmittal, and enrichment of culture by means of instruction, scholarly work, and scientific research" (ACE 1983, 17), but the document that emerged from the 1949 meeting suggested broadening the purpose of higher education to embrace several additional emphases and objectives. Among these new goals, which were adapted from the 1947 report of the President's Commission on Higher Education (the "Truman Commission"), three stand out:

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Both meetings produced documents that called on higher education to build campus environments that support individual students, while holding students accountable for their personal behaviors and for how those behaviors affect the larger community. In particular, the 1949 document stressed the importance of engaging with communities outside of the college campus. These early documents articulated the importance of educating students for both personal responsibility and social responsibility.

Contemporary higher education has seen a renewed call to focus greater attention on civic education, personal and social responsibility, and education for democracy. This renewed call suggests that, once again, many believe the purpose of higher education must be broadened to include these outcomes. Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), recently concluded that "civic learning remains optional within the curriculum" and that "democracy in any form is rarely part of the core curriculum" of higher education (2012, 3). Similarly, Caryn McTighe Musil (2012, 71) has recommended that higher education

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- reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission . . . of all sectors within higher education;
- advance a contemporary, comprehensive framework for civic learning;
- enlarge the current national narrative that erases civic aims and civic literacy as national priorities;
- capitalize upon the interdependent responsibilities of K-12 and higher education to foster progressively higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, examined values, and action;
- expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances locally, nationally, and globally to address common problems.

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) has issued similar recommendations.

The pressure to attend to new objectives in higher education, such as the current pressure to attend to the development of students' personal and social responsibility, encourages the search for a panacea, a single intervention that, if applied correctly, will lead to widespread student development and learning. The lure of the panacea is certainly strong, particularly in an era of decreasing support and increasing calls for accountability in higher education. This approach is, however, ineffective. Even in an era of decreased resources and increased accountability, a comprehensive approach to encouraging the development of personal and social responsibility is needed.

In this article, I define personal and social responsibility as a five-component outcome of college; present a case for thinking about educating for personal and social responsibility through the lens of campus climate that eschews the hunt for a single intervention and encourages the marshaling of multiple resources in multiple campus settings to encourage student learning; and highlight one instrument that can be used to assess the campus climate for personal and social responsibility—highlighting findings from pilot tests that suggest a need for campuses to focus more directly on personal and social responsibility.

Defining personal and social responsibility

In 2006, AAC&U launched Core Commitments, a initiative focused on higher education's role in encouraging the development of personal and social responsibility among students. Early in the initiative, after conducting an extensive literature review and consulting with nationally recognized experts in higher education and psychology, Lee Knefelkamp and Richard Hersh, with research assistance from Lauren Ruff, identified five dimensions of personal and social responsibility (see fig.1). The comprehensive understanding of personal and social responsibility identified through the five dimensions offers both challenges and opportunities to those within higher education who hope to encourage student learning and development in these areas. Personal and social responsibility is not a single outcome, but rather a set of related outcomes within the framework of the five dimensions. Identifying comprehensive and measureable outcomes for each of the five dimensions and developing appropriate instruments for assessing them presents a Herculean task.

Figure 1.**The five dimensions of personal and social responsibility****1. *Striving for excellence:***

Developing a strong work ethic and consciously doing one's very best in all aspects of college

2. *Cultivating academic integrity:* Recognizing and acting on a sense of honor, ranging from honesty, fairness, and respect for others and their work to engaging with a formal academic honor code

3. *Contributing to a larger community:* Recognizing and acting on one's responsibility to the educational community and the wider society, locally, nationally, and globally

4. *Taking seriously the perspectives of others:* Recognizing and acting on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engaging diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work

5. *Developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning and action:* Developing ethical and moral reasoning in ways that incorporate the other four dimensions; using such reasoning in learning and in life

The search for effective outcome measures is now underway, but could take some time. In collaboration with AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project, the Core Commitments initiative worked to further define the constituent parts of personal and social responsibility and to assist the development of rubrics for assessment. The VALUE rubrics for civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, and ethical reasoning are each directly related to a dimension of personal and social responsibility. (The VALUE rubrics are available online at www.aacu.org/VALUE/rubrics.) Certainly, other student learning outcomes also fall within the five dimensions, and these outcomes can be assessed through the use of other instruments.

Importantly, too, the Core Commitments staff recognized the urgent need for an instrument that could be used to assess campus climate and the level of support for student development along each dimension of personal and social responsibility. This recognition resulted in the development of the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI). The PSRI was developed by Knefelkamp and Hersh and refined by Eric Dey and his associates at the University of Michigan. Following an initial administration on twenty-three college campuses, and as a result of the untimely death of Dey in 2009, I then refined the PSRI further. Currently, the PSRI is offered through and administered by the School of Education at Iowa State University (see www.psri.hs.iastate.edu). The PSRI is administered each year in the spring semester to students, faculty, student affairs staff, and academic administrators. Participating institutions receive reports of individual items and factor scores for the institution, comparisons with national data, and campus-specific datasets that allow for campus-level investigations.

The importance of campus climate

In 1998, after synthesizing three decades worth of research on college student learning and development, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini warned educators against the hunt for any single intervention intended to educate all students effectively. Projecting ahead about issues of studying student outcomes in the twenty-first century, Pascarella and Terenzini suggested that the changing nature of higher education, particularly the rapidly changing demographic characteristics of the undergraduate student population, make the search for panaceas futile. Even the best interventions fall short of the lofty goals of higher education and are usually not transferrable between institutions. This may be especially true for interventions meant to influence such complex constructs as personal and social responsibility. Research suggests, however, that a powerful alternative to the search for a silver-bullet solution is the creation of comprehensive and pervasive educational environments that provide students with multiple opportunities to engage in learning and developmental activities.

We know that, in general, student learning happens when students' engagement with new experiences is reinforced by supportive campus environments composed of peers and higher education professionals, and when it is encouraged by institutional policies aimed at both the curricular and cocurricular levels (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Terenzini and Reason 2012). The individual student's experiences account for the vast majority of learning, but these experiences are encouraged or discouraged by peers, faculty members, and institutional policies that make up the overall campus climate for learning. In line with this empirically based understanding, the guiding philosophy of AAC&U's Core Commitments initiative focused on the pervasiveness of teaching and learning for personal and social responsibility; that is, the initiative sought to help institutions create campus climates that support the development of personal and social responsibility among students.

Defining campus climate

Although it has long been understood that the campus climate can have profound effects on all members of the campus community, it has been difficult to agree upon a common definition of campus climate. Climate has been defined in various ways throughout the literature on higher education; these disparate understandings, however, share several characteristics. Most importantly, perhaps, is the common understanding that "climate" is multifaceted, includes people's attitudes and behaviors, and is more malleable than culture. Further, climate interacts with organizational policies and practices. In fact, for some authors (e.g., Petersen and Spencer 1990), organizational climate flows directly from, and is dictated by, the institutional policies and practices.

Petersen and Spencer suggest that an institution's climate has three dimensions: objective, perceived, and psychological. The objective dimension is made up of observable behaviors. The perceived dimension is comprised of the "cognitive images" of members regarding the organization. The authors cite such things as organizational members' perceptions of policy making, governance, and goals as examples of the perceived dimensions of climate. Finally, Petersen and Spencer define the psychological dimension of organizational climate as members' feelings about their organization, drawing a nuanced distinction between perceived and psychological elements of climate. The

authors provide a succinct definition of climate as "current common patterns of important dimensions of organizational life or its members' perceptions of and attitudes toward those dimensions" (1990, 7).

Petersen and Spencer's definition of organizational climate provides guidance for those who endeavor to assess and refine campus climates. At a minimum, campus climate assessments must take into account the perspectives of multiple constituencies on a campus, including faculty members, academic and student affairs administrators, and students. Climate assessments should also include items related to campus policies and practices as well as items related to the behaviors of individual community members. Items on climate assessments must be written in ways that solicit information about perceptions and feelings along with more objective measures of behaviors.

The educational potential of campus climates

Although there is little empirical evidence to connect campus climate directly to students' learning and developmental outcomes—or, more specifically, to the development of personal and social responsibility—the existing research strongly suggests that campus climate can support or impede student outcomes. Negative campus climates—those described as "chilly" or perceived to be discriminatory, for example—have been linked to decreased likelihood of persistence among students of color and white students alike (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) and decreased scholarly productivity among faculty members (Seifert and Umbach 2008).

According to George Kuh and his colleagues (2005), who studied institutions that were highly effective in supporting student success, a shared campus climate can be educationally powerful. The institutions in Kuh's study acted on deeply held, and widely shared, commitments to student success. This underlying commitment to student success is likely reflected in wide-ranging and mutually reinforcing policies and programs aligned with the prevailing conclusions of the research literature. It is through the adoption of complimentary policies and practices that an institution encourages student behaviors that make a positive contribution to their achievement of learning outcomes.

The influence of climate on personal and social responsibility

Research emerging from the work of the Core Commitments initiative, specifically the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory, suggests that similar relationships exist between the perception of campus climate and the development of personal and social responsibility among college students. Nancy O'Neill (2012) provides an extensive descriptive overview of students' development of specific learning outcomes within each of the five dimensions of personal and social responsibility measured by the PSRI. Her report paints a generally positive picture of learning for personal and social responsibility on college and university campuses, but as one would expect, the responses to individual items are difficult to interpret because they are a result of individual student behaviors.

In order more fully to understand the relationship between campus climate and student development along the dimensions of personal and social responsibility, PSRI researchers created scales of items related both to the general climate for each dimension and to students' assessment of their own

development along each dimension. Figure 2 provides an overview of all the factor scales within each PSRI dimension. Figure 3 provides an overview of the student and professional assessment of the general climate for each of the five dimensions assessed through the PSRI. Arrayed as such, the obvious conclusion is that both students and campus professionals believe the climate for developing personal and social responsibility is positive.

Figure 2. Factor scales within the five dimensions

1. Striving for excellence

- Overall climate for excellence
- Motivation to develop a strong work ethic
- Communicating expectations about excellence
- Developing a strong work ethic

2. Cultivating academic integrity

- General climate for academic integrity
- Faculty roles in academic integrity
- Developing academic integrity

3. Contributing to a larger community

- General climate for contributing to a larger community
- Advocating for contributing to a larger community
- Developing a commitment to contributing to a larger community

4. Taking seriously the perspectives of others

- General climate for perspective taking
- Advocating for perspective taking
- Developing perspective taking

5. Developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning and action

- General climate for ethical and moral reasoning
- Sources of support for ethical and moral reasoning
- Developing ethical and moral reasoning

More importantly for this discussion, the strength of the relationships between each dimension's general climate measure and students' self-assessment of development along that dimension is positive and strong. Even after controlling for students' assessment of their own precollege development within a dimension, the analysis shows a direct and significant relationship between climate and student development within each dimension.

Figure 3. Ratings of Genreal Climate for Each Dimension

 Figure 3. Ratings of General Climate for Each Dimension

Regression coefficients for the climate measures, after controlling for entry-level development, ranged from 0.22 to 0.75 (see table 1). The relationships between the "social responsibility" dimensions (contributing to the larger community, taking seriously the perspectives of others, and ethical and moral decision making and action) were the most powerful. These socially oriented outcomes were more influenced by campus climate than were the more personally oriented outcomes of striving for excellence and developing personal and academic integrity, although the relationship between personal outcomes and campus climate was still significant.

Table 1. Relationship between campus climate and students' development in each dimension	
Dimension	Standardized regression coefficient*
<i>Striving for excellence</i>	
Precollege control	0.221
Climate for excellence	0.251
<i>Cultivating academic integrity</i>	
Precollege control	-0.052
Climate for integrity	0.221
<i>Contributing to a larger community</i>	
Precollege control	0.199
Climate for Contributing	0.329
<i>Taking seriously the perspectives of others</i>	
Precollege control	0.067
Climate for perspective taking	0.419
<i>Developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning and action</i>	
Precollege control	0.018
Climate for ethics	0.754
* All coefficients are significant at the p<0.001 level.	

Conclusion and implications

Early research using data collected from the PSRI demonstrates that perceptions of campus climate are related to student learning and development. Previous research on other student learning outcomes had suggested such a relationship, but the PSRI has allowed researchers to confirm it. The more a college or university can do to create a campus climate that supports students in the development of personal and social responsibility, the more the institution can expect students to develop along these dimensions.

Understood within the larger body of research on student outcomes, these initial findings suggest that, rather than engage in a futile search for a single "best practice" intervention, institutional administrators should take a comprehensive approach to educating for personal and social responsibility. Creating a supportive climate requires that institutional policies and practices be aligned with faculty and administrative cultures in order to influence student behaviors. It is highly unlikely that

any single intervention could influence all the necessary components of campus climate as well as an intentional, comprehensive set of interventions can.

The renewed call for incorporating personal and social responsibility into the core mission of higher education is not likely to be silenced any time soon. Even with external pressure for greater accountability and with fewer resources, higher education institutions must attend to the development of civic-minded students who can work cooperatively and with integrity to solve community-based problems. An intentional focus on students' development of personal and social responsibility must become part of the core mission of colleges and universities; creating supportive campus climates is a first step in reinvigorating the civic mission of higher education.

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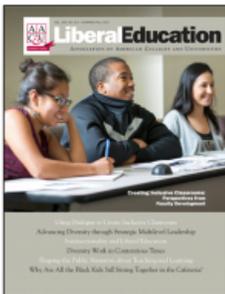
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