

**Communicating for Character:  
Designing Community Values Statements**

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### Author Autobiography

I recently completed my Ph.D. in Student Affairs Administration at the University of Georgia. My dissertation topic was titled, *Context, moral orientation, and self-esteem: Impacting the moral development of college students*. My research interests in the areas of moral, ethical, and character development came from my work with student conduct and residence life. Dr. Diane Cooper served as my academic advisor and chair of my publishable paper and dissertation committees. This article is an amended version of my final publishable paper research.

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the process used to create community values statements at six public institutions of higher education in the United States and provides a framework for other institutions that may be considering creating a community values statement on their campus. The goal of the study was to provide data that will benefit other institutions of higher education interested in the development of community values statements, emphasizing how these statements were conceptualized, developed, and implemented. The study also summarizes the content of these statements and addresses themes present in all six statements. Finally, a model framework for the design and implementation of a community values statement is provided. Regardless of institutional size or location, this model attempts to take into account issues raised by this research.

## **Communicating for Character:**

### **Designing Community Values Statements**

Popular opinion, as articulated by the media, suggests that schools, including colleges and universities, have a responsibility to educate students about “good” values, such as honesty, respect, integrity, etc., and how to use these values to make informed decisions. A number of colleges and universities have developed community values statements as a means of prescribing positive expectations of interpersonal conduct and values by which to gauge ethical decision-making. While some campuses have used these statements as alternatives to conduct codes, others use them to shape the character and leadership development of their students.

The term ‘character’ has come to be used to describe someone who displays a set of positive traits (for example, ‘she is a person of character and integrity’). However, character is a value neutral term by definition, neither implying whether an individual is of good or poor character. Character has come to encompass the totality of the individual and the positive attributes demonstrated. Character development is “the growth of those aspects of the individual that represent his or her ethical worth, including behavior, cognition, affect, values, personality, identity, and skills that are not moral themselves but that support moral functioning” (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999, p. 18). Since character has been used as a descriptor for someone of high integrity or moral functioning, character will be used to describe how all the aspects of morality manifest as the outwardly observable positive behaviors. It is the set of behaviors that these community values statements were designed to describe.

Dalton (1999) outlined what the university environment should provide to further the character education and moral development of students: (a) a mission statement detailing core values and virtues; (b) a general education curriculum that reinforces these core values and

virtues as educational outcomes; (c) an academic honor code; (d) a student conduct code which details the rights and duties of citizenship; (e) a student compact or creed to confirm the shared values of community membership; (f) opportunities to engage in community service and community building; (g) a campus ethos of welcoming and caring for students; (h) new student programs that introduce students to institutional and community values, role models, traditions, and culture; (i) campus governance structures for students; (j) role modeling by University leaders; (k) rewards and recognition for exemplary students, faculty and staff who model values; (l) support for spiritual and religious expression and development; and (m) structured opportunity for public debate on moral issues. Character education efforts, therefore, should link to educational outcomes that the institution deems important. Through these efforts, particularly through our communication, we teach students about what the community and individuals within the community value, how to honor what they value within this context, and how to effectively communicate and act on these values.

The purpose of this study was to (a) explore the process used to create community values statements at institutions of higher education in the United States and (b) suggest methods for other institutions that may be considering creating a community values statement on their campus. The goal of the study was to provide data that will benefit other institutions of higher education interested in the development of community values statements, emphasizing how these statements were conceptualized, developed, and implemented.

### **Methodology**

Limited research regarding how institutions conceptualize, develop, and implement community values statements made the qualitative research method an appropriate method of inquiry for this study.

## Data Collection

In order to capture data available on how colleges and universities developed these statements and how the campus community perceived that process, a series of open-ended questions were designed to elicit information regarding the process and perceptions surrounding the creation of community values statements. The Chief Student Affairs Officers from six public institutions were contacted to determine the campus administrator/faculty member who was most actively engaged in, or who directed, the development of the statement and then that person was contacted regarding participation in the interview.

The campuses chosen to participate in this study were not limited by geographic region of the country. Participation was solicited by requests made to the Association for Student Judicial Affairs membership listserv, as well as their student judicial discussion listserv. Respondents indicated whether their respective campuses had a community values statement and provided a copy when available. Forty-eight institutions responded to the request, and six public institutions were selected from those who indicated that they had a community values statement (in total, eighteen institutions responded they actually had community values statements). By using six public institutions, it was hoped some commonality of themes would emerge to guide subsequent research.

Participants were sent the interview questions ahead of time so that the researchers could respect their time constraints. A personal interview was then conducted by telephone with the pertinent individual identified for each of the six campuses. The interviews were approximately a half-hour in length. The interview questions were:

- (1) How was the development of your community values statement initiated?

- (2) How was the development of the community values statement designed and implemented?
- (3) How do students, faculty, and staff learn about the community values statement?
- (4) What institutional factors impacted the development and implementation of the community values statement?

### **Data Analysis**

All six interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed. By utilizing the constant comparative method of comparing transcripts to one another, the researcher was able to determine similarities and differences in the processes and specific community values statements. Themes were identified, refined, and integrated, which provided a theoretical framework by which to analyze and interpret data (Merriam, 1998).

The reliability of the study was addressed in three ways. First, the interviews were conducted using a list of questions that had been provided to the participants on at least two occasions prior to the interview. Second, member checks were completed by asking the participants to review and revise the transcripts for accuracy (Merriam, 1998). One transcript was edited completely for grammar and syntax, including the words of the researcher. Finally, researcher assumptions, theoretical orientations, and worldviews were revealed to inform the readers of researcher biases (Merriam, 1998).

### **Institutional Profiles**

Each of the institutions participating in this study is described in Table 1. Either the Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) or a student affairs staff member identified by the CSAO as most actively engaged in, or who directed, the development of the statement, was interviewed.

While, in most cases, individual faculty were involved in the development of community values statements, none were designated as the individual to be interviewed.

### **Limitations**

The study is not intended to be generalizable or exhaustive as many more institutions than those who responded have community values statements. Instead, through looking at the experiences of the six selected public institutions, this study can provide a framework for the conceptualization, design, and implementation of community values statements for other institutions of higher education. Public institutions were chosen to control for moral edicts typically present in the missions of private, religious institutions.

### **Findings**

A constant comparative analysis of the six community values statements yielded five major categories regarding the design and implementation of these statements: (a) initiation, (b) stakeholders or involved parties, (c) process, (d) institutional context, and (e) marketing and creating awareness. Though the end product of each of these processes was reasonably similar, the design and implementation processes greatly varied.

**Initiation.** In all six processes, student affairs divisions had a prominent role in initiating and driving the design and implementation process. Whether directed by a single individual, a group of professionals and/or faculty, or student affairs divisional committees, student affairs led the charge in putting to paper the community's core values.

At Institution E, the President directed campus efforts at promoting community service and citizenship, which prompted the Vice President for Student Affairs to consider a set of core values to provide a "philosophic base for the policies and procedures documents that govern student behavior." At Institution B, a senior staff member, after hearing from students their

desire to have a statement of community expectations, went to the Vice President for Student Affairs, who went to the President, who charged a task force, chaired by the senior staff member, to write this statement. This individual noted, “we pulled people from the academic side, from the student services side, from every place we could find input, put them together, and talked about what we needed to do.” The number of people involved varied widely among institutions from as few as three to hundreds giving input. Three institutions directly involved students in developing the statement, while the other three involved some mix of student affairs staff and faculty.

**Stakeholders or involved parties.** Institutions considered a wide variety of campus groups to be stakeholders in this process, including students, faculty, and staff. Students often represented various student organizations such as student government, Greeks, residence hall staff, and the Residence Hall Association (RHA). The student affairs divisional committees at two of the institutions comprised a cross section of campus residents, commuters, non-traditional students, students of ethnic diversity, etc., and this group created initial statement drafts. In general, faculty representatives were chosen from among those viewed as student affairs’ allies and cheerleaders or on occasion appointed by the faculty senate. Committee chairs varied from the Vice President of Student Affairs to the Dean of Students to the Director of Campus Life, but were always staff members in student affairs.

Three institutions did not seek the involvement of the faculty senate in directly providing input. When time came to approve the statements, the approval of the staff senate, faculty senate, graduate student government, and/or student government was often necessary. Another institution went to their faculty senate this past year for a review and minor editing, in order to get faculty buy in to the concept. The other two institutions cited previous policy development

and mission revision processes that became quite laborious with their respective faculty senate groups laboring over the meaning of every word in these documents. They both indicated an unwillingness to wait the amount of time necessary to allow a similar critique before putting the community values statement in place.

**Process.** Institution A had the most comprehensive process for the design and implementation of their community values statement. As described in the interview,

...the committee members visited with over 39 individual student groups and did widespread outreach with hundreds of students, staff, faculty and alumni, which led to 1200 different suggestions for the creed, for lack of a better term. The data was sorted, prioritized, and compared to some of our existing documents. Drafts of the document were circulated to the University community and then the Student Senate, the Graduate Student Association, and the University President's Team endorsed a final document. They had met with honor societies, the undergraduate student government, not only on the main campus but also at our (name deleted) campus, the graduate student government, the social regulations committee, the alumni association, the Faculty Senate Executive Committee, faculty emeriti, the Registrar's Advisory Council (Assistant Dean's of colleges), classes, nine different bargaining units (unions), University vice presidents, and the chaplains. They put articles in the campus newspaper and had booths in the union. I mean they really, really reached out.

The questions asked of all these constituents included: "(a) What ideals, values, and standards define the (name deleted) student or any member of this community? (b) What should this document be called? (c) How could such a document become an integral part of university life?" Amazingly, this process only took seven months to complete.

In comparison to this more elaborate process, another institution had two people write a draft and then sought campus involvement, taking 18 months to rewrite and have approved by the student government, staff senate, faculty senate, and board of governors. Another institution began their process only to learn from a faculty committee member that a community values statement already existed of which few were aware. The committee adapted this statement by removing one principle, which was recently added back to the document. These interviews brought to light that stakeholder involvement and approval can protract the length of the process, but appear critical to creating buy in and getting necessary involvement in educating students about the community values statement.

**Institutional context.** As indicated earlier, two institutions chose not to seek the approval of their Faculty Senate, due to the typical length of a faculty review process. Institution A stated that a previous vision and mission statement review “was a laborious process and also a tough process.” The faculty senate had paid very close attention to small details of that revision process and took a considerable amount of time to complete the process, which discouraged the committee from seeking full approval for the community values statement. This institution and the others did involve faculty in some manner, and four of the institutions sought the eventual approval of the faculty senate, though only one institution involved them in the actual initial writing process. It is important to note this institution had the longest time from initiation to completion of eighteen months. This participant described that a vocal minority of the faculty senate had concerns regarding the statement’s tenets and expressed concerns about creating a politically correct climate by enacting the statement. The institution that chose to bypass the faculty senate, upsetting the President of this group, had a final statement prepared in six to eight weeks with individual faculty assistance.

The institutional factors that precipitated the desire for the statement included significant policy changes regarding alcohol and substance abuse issues on campus. Institution A had dramatically changed policies regarding alcohol and substance abuse enforcement and sanctions. As a result the institution decided it wanted to capture the positive principles for which their community stood. Institution C recognized a steady increase in domestic violence situations and wanted to teach students how to take a stand and not be victims of abuse. They also wanted to get student organizations to promote positive and acceptable community behavior. Institution C shared,

...we have to deal with a common thread of community. We are concerned, not just about ourselves, but others. We are also trying to produce leaders who are going to go out and also be good citizens in the larger community. The only way you can do that is when you get past your concern for yourself and demonstrate a desire to improve your community one person at a time.

Institution B recognized cheating and plagiarism as campus issues, and noted, "The University needed to take a stand as a whole, as a community, not just the individual professors. There needed to be a community values statement about what we were seeing and what we expected."

Institution E, a Templeton Character Building University, began a proactive program of community service and citizenship initiatives in 1993-1994. In conjunction with this project, student affairs developed a new mission statement including the creation of a civil and caring community. At the same time, the university was given a statewide mission as a public affairs institution. Their statement was explained:

...in our community principles, they are all related to create a climate, an ideal climate, not necessarily perfect, but it is hard to escape how these values are interwoven, and the basis for all the documents we actually write on policies and procedures.

Institution F also noted a proactive shift in Student Affairs philosophy from a more archaic model to a focus on “healthy, engaged, active, successful students.” All the institutions shared that they sought a set of core values or principles for which their community stood, so they could articulate these positive expectations to students, faculty, and staff. They all also referenced their awareness of and interest in the community values statements of other institutions.

**Marketing and creating awareness.** Most institutions relied on written material in almost all University publications, including orientation materials, the University catalogue, student handbooks, faculty and staff newsletters, inside covers of blue books, inside covers of university logo spiral notebooks, wallet cards, student organization manuals, campus survival guides, and codes of student conduct. Campuses also published half page advertisements in the campus newspaper and on their web site, provided special framed versions for staff and faculty offices, posted it in every classroom, and noted it on class syllabi. Verbal discussions of the statement were provided in RA floor meetings, the President’s opening speech, freshmen convocation speeches, class discussions, faculty orientation programs, judicial conversations, and Dean’s meetings. Programmatic efforts included student organizations taking a tenet and promoting it for a week, faculty in English using it as part of a writing assignment, financial support of programming, and Institution C noted that it encourages “curriculum infusion.” Only one institution had an actual three-year plan for creating greater awareness of their community values statement. One institution noted that they had done so much, so fast, that no one was paying attention any more.

Only one institution had a yearly formal, celebratory signing of their community values statement. Another institution indicated they had done this initially but had stopped after that first year. Every institution indicated that the community values statement is discussed in length at orientation with both parents and students. Two institutions have it tied into their first year orientation courses, and one institution was in the process of designing a similar course and intended to include similar dialogue. Each institution described a process of indoctrinating students into the campus culture, and the community values statement serves as “positive propaganda” (Institution F) in meeting this goal.

### **Content of the Community Values Statements**

A constant comparative analysis of the six community values statements included in this study yielded five major categories regarding the content of these statements. These categories were labeled (a) citizenship and community, (b) civility and appreciating diversity, (c) personal health and wellness, and self-awareness, (d) integrity and ethical decision making, and (e) learning and scholarship. Only one statement attempted to lay out specific behaviors necessary for living in alignment with the core values of the community. The other five provided a more a nebulous, philosophical picture of the ideal campus community.

**Citizenship and community.** Every community values statement explicitly addressed the importance of community and citizenship. Most spoke of ideals and values to emulate in their campus and local communities—an open and supportive environment, challenging wrong, a safe and clean community, and dedication to shared goals and values.

Institution B’s statement indicated, “I will use my talents to enrich the human experience,” while Institution E’s statement stressed the importance of “being a steward of the shared resources of the community of scholars.” Institution C’s statement stated, “As a member

of the (name deleted) community, I believe in the values that promote responsible citizenship, concern for self and others, and the desire to build a better world.” All these statements communicated the shared expectations of community membership, both on campus and beyond. They also furthered the notion of our shared responsibility for enriching our communities. When considering this notion of shared responsibility, it was important to note three of the statements use “I” statements, while three were framed from the perspective of “we,” the entire community.

**Civility and appreciating diversity.** Each statement explored the importance of respecting and valuing the ideas, opinions, contributions, and rights of others. Some of the statements addressed bigotry, intolerance, and hatred though none specifically state particular groups of concern. Institution D described their community as “a watchful community remaining alert to the threats posed by hatred, intolerance and other injustices and ever-prepared to combat them.” Only three statements specifically mentioned the need to learn from these differences, while all reference respecting and valuing these differences.

**Personal health and wellness, and self-awareness.** Five of the six statements referenced individual responsibility for their performance, health, well-being, and education. Institution C’s statement contained the line, “I will afford myself the best opportunity to succeed.” Their statement also stated, “I will respect my body by not abusing it.” Two statements written from the community perspective also stated the role of the community in providing an environment conducive to improving the individual’s health and well-being.

**Integrity and ethical decision-making.** Again all six statements addressed integrity and honesty. Some included additional descriptors of fairness and courage in acting with integrity. They each addressed the importance of personal, social, and academic integrity. Institution B’s statement stated, “I will practice and defend academic and personal integrity.” Institution A’s

statement indicated their campus was “a principled community.” Only one statement mentioned that the laws of the state and rules and regulations of the institution must also be followed.

**Learning and scholarship.** Five statements addressed learning, scholarship, or the acquisition of knowledge as one of the fundamental purposes of their educational community. Institution B’s explained, “I will cherish and honor learning as a fundamental purpose of my membership in the (name deleted) community.” Institution E’s statement stated one of their principles was, “Being a full participant in the educational process, and respecting the right of all to contribute to the ‘Marketplace of Ideas’.”

### **Implications**

Dalton (1999) in *Good Practice in Student Affairs: Principles to Foster Student Learning* reminds of us of “the importance of teaching students to acquire and utilize knowledge in the context of core values and ethical standards such as justice, equality, civility, freedom, dignity, and responsible citizenship” (p. 45). Institutions of higher education play an important role in preparing students to act with character and serve as stewards of their communities. Community values statements should provide both guidelines for shaping ethical decision-making and expectations for community membership.

**Initiation.** Preparing to write a community values statement involves working with people within social and institutional contexts. As Isaac (1987) notes, we have to think about how we share power in terms of “enduring social relationships” (p. 51). In an educational setting, we need to determine who will champion the process of designing and implementing a community values statement. We want well-placed allies as we seek support and throughout the entire process of writing and implementing this statement.

**Stakeholders.** A critical consideration in developing a community values statement is deciding who has ownership in and of this process. Wilson and Cevero (1996) indicate within the planning process, we must determine who helps define the issues, in our case the community values. These stakeholders will also shape other components of this process, including naming the statement, the purpose of the project, determining how to make it part of the campus culture, and other critical variables. We need to know whose interests the process will impact. Since all six statements either addressed values from a community perspective (we) or from an individual perspective (I) within the context of community, it must be determined who should accept, promote, and emulate our community values. If students, faculty, staff, alumni/ae, campus guests, or others are expected to live by these values, they must have a role in defining these values and shaping this process.

**Process.** Once we have representatives of the key stakeholders involved and have garnered support for this project, we can then decide how to approach the design and implementation process. A few considerations appear paramount: (a) identifying core community values, (b) timing, (c) consistency with institutional and student affairs missions, visions, goals, and documents, and (d) a gatekeeper for promoting awareness and initiating passive and active educational opportunities tied to the statement.

Trice and Beyer (as cited in Kuh and Whitt, 1998) indicate culture has “(1) substance, or the network of meanings contained in its ideologies, norms, and values; and (2) forms, or the practices whereby these meanings are expressed, affirmed, and communicated to members” (p. 135). There are many ways to identify values within a campus culture, given this description. A campus could conduct a culture audit, where stakeholders are interviewed individually and in groups, and significant campus documents are analyzed for core value themes. Institution A’s

approach illustrates a process that attempts to include all primary stakeholders both on the main campus and at any distance learning sites. This process also allows us to address the consistency of the community values statement with all institutional and student affairs documentation.

While time is always of the essence, involving primary stakeholders and creating support takes a great deal of time. We are investing in relationships and partnerships and any significant, meaningful relationship requires time and attention. It will prove difficult to weave the community values statement into the fabric of the campus culture if stakeholders are not included and do not support the process.

Often campuses create community values statements then expect a product, which will sustain itself. A written document can be nothing more than words if someone does not serve as gatekeeper for its importance within the campus community. Some individual or office should be designated as a gatekeeper who brings stakeholders together to create and continually evaluate a strategic plan of weaving the community values statement into the culture. A good community values statement can provide a framework for service and educational programming and meaningful dialogue between students, faculty, and staff. It could replace programming models, such as the wellness model, as we tie our core values to student, faculty, and staff skill development and education.

**Institutional Context.** The most significant issue in this area involves partnering with faculty. Shroeder (1999) indicates we should “build partnerships around a shared vision of what matters in undergraduate education and establish clear program purposes with measurable educational outcomes” (p. 154). One interesting result of this study is the number of community values statements that forward a shared vision of community when only one institution appears

to have directly involved their faculty senate in the editing of their statement. This institution also had the longest process for creating their final product.

Often we, as student affairs professionals, view faculty as “difficult” or barriers to be overcome, and then we want them to champion our causes in which they had no role in developing. We need to take a more critical look at the political climate on our campuses and the power garnered by individuals and groups whom we will want to champion our ideas. By allowing time to build relationships and find our shared goals and values for undergraduate education, we can partner in impacting student learning by tying together the curricular and co-curricular to allow for experiential and epistemological education.

**Marketing and Awareness.** Marketing occurred through all the normal channels—written word and dialogue. Marketing appears to be a balancing act between making the community values statement meaningful while not saturating the campus to the point no one pays attention. Again a gatekeeper can serve as the facilitator of a strategic plan regarding marketing and awareness campaigns. While every institution discussed their statement during orientation, only one had a ceremonial ritual for celebrating the importance of the statement. This may be an issue of institutional size, but both passive and active avenues should be explored for weaving the statement into the campus culture. One example may include using the community values statement as grounding for all campus service learning and educational efforts.

### **A Model Community Values Statement Design and Implementation Process**

The following provides a model framework for the design and implementation of a community values statement. Regardless of institutional size or location, this model attempts to take into account issues raised by this research. While the results certainly are not broadly

generalizable, they do further a common set of questions to be considered when directing this process.

### **Initiation**

- How does one initiate change on your campus?
- Who gets the best response when initiating new ideas?
- How has the campus reacted to change in the past?
- What is the reputation of student affairs as a partner in the learning environment and the development of students?

### **Stakeholders**

- Who are your partners in the learning enterprise? Consider those internal and external to campus.

### **Process**

- Who will champion the process and/or idea?
- How will you create support for the process?
- How will you insure that the statement is consistent with the institutional and student affairs mission, vision, goals, and other significant institutional documents?
- How will you identify core values?
- Who will become the gatekeeper of the statement and weave it into the campus culture?

### **Institutional Context**

- How strong is the faculty senate? Staff senate? Student government?
- What role will each of these entities have in your process? Why?
- What institutional policies, procedures, and practices may be inconsistent with the community values statement? How will you respond if these are raised as issues?

- How will you reward and recognize those who support the statement and act consistently with it? How will you support the behavior desired from the entire campus community?

### **Marketing and Awareness**

- What will a strategic plan for the design and implementation look like? Who will direct this process? Who will be involved in it?
- How will you make the community aware of the community values statement—written means, verbal means, and ceremonial activities impacting a culture shift on campus?
- How will you make philosophical values real? How will you relate them to your service and educational efforts? Who will be involved?
- What do students, faculty and staff need to do to successfully integrate these principles into campus life? Into their personal life?

### **Evaluation**

- Based on the type of statement you plan to create, what will you need to measure to assess the impact of the statement?
- Who will be the person or group on your campus most closely involved in measuring the success of the statement?
- What tools will be used for evaluation?

With an appropriate time investment and careful consideration of the questions provided, a campus can engage stakeholders in the successful design and implementation of a community values statement. Community values statements could then be used to not only guide your programming and service efforts, but also serve as a framework for designing assessment activities.

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*Table 1**Institutional Participants*

<b>INSTITUTION</b>	<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>	<b>GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION</b>
A	13,644	Northeast
B	39,015	Southeast
C	6,573	Southeast
D	4,500	Northeast
E	18,000	Midwest
F	10,930	Midwest

\*Total number of students was obtained from the institutional web site and may vary from actual 2002-2003 enrollment data.