I, Jennifer L Willis, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Counselor Education.

It is entitled:
Character Education and Emerging Adulthood: A Multiple Case Study of the Impact of High School Character Education on Students in the College Environment

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University of Cincinnati
Character Education and Emerging Adulthood: A Multiple Case Study of the Impact of High School Character Education on Students in the College Environment

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Abstract

This study explored how four young adults experienced the lasting effects of high school character education in the college environment. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this multiple case study explored how college students identified high school character education in their own high school, how college students utilized their high school character education, and how college student’s context shaped the utilization of character education. This study serves to address the existing gap in the literature by focusing on college student experience and extends the current line of inquiry to focus specifically on student experience, with participants who have progressed beyond the high school environment into college.

Data collection consisted of rich descriptions provided by four participants through individual interviews. Data analysis followed the guidelines set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006) and are presented in four case-by-case analyses as well as a cross case analysis describing the general phenomenon across all of the cases. Five themes emerged from the cross-case analysis describing how the four young adults experienced the lasting effects of high school character education in the college environment: 1) explicit curriculum, 2) faculty involvement and connection, 3) independence and autonomy, 4) creating new connections in college, and 5) diversity. The findings from this study can serve to assist school counselors and administrators who are interested in developing and implementing character education programs in the high school environment.
Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to Laurie, Lisa, and Gail, who have inspired me to pursue my passions, both personal and professional, with confidence and tenacity.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Counselors aim to equip individuals with the skills, knowledge, and coping strategies necessary to provide the opportunity to live in an authentic and meaningful way. In the high school environment, school counselors are uniquely positioned to provide guidance and direct training for students in a key stage of development as they work to resolve issues of identity and develop decision-making skills to serve them throughout their lifetime (Park, 2006). Character education is one means for providing direct instruction related to the skill- and capacity-building that prepares students to achieve their best selves, equipping them with knowledge, practice, and models for establishing the attitudes and behaviors necessary to care for themselves and others as they pursue their goals with enthusiasm and intention (Isaacowitz, Vaillant, & Seligman, 2003; Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

The potential for strong character exists within each individual, emerging throughout maturity. Good character has been described as a family of positive traits that are reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Park, 2006). In the field of Positive Psychology these traits are termed character strengths and describe positive individual traits, like the capacity for love, forgiveness, and wisdom, as well as group-level qualities, including altruism and work ethic (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Character strengths can help us to understand the characteristics that contribute to optimal human development, peak performance, and the well-being of society, and have been shown to have a buffer effect for youth, and can serve to support individual well-being (Park, 2006; Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2011). Character strengths in youth have been associated with a number of positive outcomes like school success and kindness, and a reduction in negative outcomes like substance use and depression (Park, 2004).
Based on the findings surrounding the importance of character strengths in youth, there has been a push to arm children with the tools they may need to help them reach their potential while guarding against negative behaviors. The specific ways in which character develops varies from person to person, with family and community as significant influences for young people exploring what it means to contribute as a member of society. In addition to the family and community, schools also play an important role in the development of character (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). With this awareness, teachers, administrators, and counselors across the country have made a conscious effort to implement character development programming into the school environment, ultimately aiming to promote the social and emotional competencies students need to thrive (Seligman, Ernest, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Character education is one means for providing students with direct and intentional guidance and skill-practice in developing character strengths.

The term character education is poorly defined, yet widely used. Research surrounding character education has failed to provide consistent direction with respect to operationalizing the definition, implementation, or outcomes of character education (for a review, see Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). The current state of the literature is crowded with theories, frameworks, programs, and evaluation tools. Because there are so many tools and programs available, school counselors and other stakeholders who are looking to establish or improve character development programming may have difficulty navigating the landscape and selecting or developing an approach that is appropriate for their environment. Additionally, researchers have committed the majority of their focus to addressing quantitative outcomes related to character education in the K-12 environment (grades, violent acts) without exploration into the long-term impact of these interventions (Bavarian et al., 2013; Beets et al., 2009; Govindji & Linley, 2007; Hawkins,
Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, 2005; Isaacowitz, Vaillant, & Seligman, 2003; Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2010). The quantitative focus of this work has not given voice to the real focus on the programming, the students. Further, the short-term nature of the work has failed to follow-up with students once they leave the school environment in which they received character education and, in doing so, missed an opportunity to better understand the long-term impact on students’ development. The principle interest of this dissertation study is to extend the investigation into the college environment by exploring college student perceptions related to the character education experiences they gained in high school.

Character education serves as a means for assisting students in the development of “positive personal and social attitudes and skills that will help them to lead satisfying and productive lives” (Battistich, 2008, p. 2). The formal and informal efforts that are made to promote character during the formative years of childhood and adolescence have the potential to create meaningful change not only in an individual’s youth, but also contribute to a lifetime of benefits through social, emotional, intellectual, and ethical development (Seligman et al., 2009). Character education has been linked to increased academic performance and aspirations, motivation, increased positive social behavior, attachment to school, conflict-resolution skills, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, and respect for teachers, as well as decreased absenteeism, suspensions, pregnancy, school anxiety, and substance use (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). These outcomes associated with character education suggest that students may experience long-term benefits as a result of their exposure to this programming, but there is an absence of research within the literature investigating how high school character education impacts students once they reach the college environment.
The transition from high school to the college environment represents a variety of significant tasks, challenges, and opportunities. College students are likely to be dealing with issues of separation as students establish themselves outside of their parents’ home, decreasing their dependence on their families and high school context (Grayson, 1989). Students between the ages of 18 and 25 fall into a developmental stage termed “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000), which is marked by a time of identity exploration and possibility. During these years, individuals explore their options related to love, work, and worldview (Arnett, 2007; Arnett, 2000) and confront opportunities for growth with respect to building values, competencies, attitudes, beliefs, identity, relationships, and self-concept (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009). Developmentally speaking, college students must manage identity formation, intimacy, and separation as they navigate a brand new environment.

College student experience is shaped by both individual development related to separation, identity formation, intimacy, and the environmental context in which they address these tasks. Throughout these processes, college students must also manage a variety of opportunities for decision-making, some of which may result from new and unfamiliar situations. In the college context, students face the intersection of aspiration and reality as they decide how they will balance ethical behavior and the desire to succeed while also working to separate from parents, establish their identity, and form meaningful and fulfilling relationships with others. A successful transition to the college environment may rely on students having a clear sense of who they are and making decisions that are consistent with their goals, values, and expectations (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013).

Within the struggles to establish separation, identity, and intimacy in the new environment, college students rely on coping skills and strategies as they manage uncertainty and
ambiguity, finding security in a new environment, dealing with issues of inadequacy and self-esteem, decision-making, and commitment to life goals (Arnett, 2000; Azmitia et al., 2013; Grayson, 1989; McDonald & Asher, 2013). Character education represents one opportunity for schools to provide intentional, direct instruction for interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge and skills. Depending on the focus of the school in which they receive character education, students may experience the process differently. Although some schools may implement character education programming to impact the unique personal characteristics of the students, emphasizing individual decision-making, other schools may focus on using character education programming to improve or stabilize the school environment, emphasizing the role of the student as a community member. Given these considerations, students may feel as though the programming is intended for their own benefit, for the benefit of the school, or some combination of the two. In contrast, schools may select to purchase and implement formal programs, or develop their own tailored approach. Both of these options have unique strengths and weaknesses. Formal programs purchased by the school are more likely to be research-based and come with pre-packaged materials (although this is not always the case). Homegrown approaches tend to be more flexible and tailored to the specific school environment.

Research surrounding character education has struggled to establish a solid foundation of universally-accepted standards and norms for measuring outcomes and effectiveness. The variety of programs and interventions that exist make it difficult to compare and contrast efforts being made within schools and the impact that these interventions have on students and the school environment. Because research has consistently emphasized quantitative outcomes of character education related to measures of achievement and behavior, little is known regarding the experience of the students who have received these interventions. Similarly, little work has been
conducted surrounding the long-term impact of character education or the experiences of students who receive this kind of programming as part of their curriculum. Research is needed to establish an understanding for the extent to which the impact of high school character education persists for students in the college environment.

Qualitative inquiry presents an opportunity for researchers to explore phenomenon and experience through inductive means (Merriam, 2009). Case study is one technique for understanding individual, group, and organizational phenomenon (Yin, 2014). Using an exploratory case study methodology with multiple-case analysis (Yin, 2014), this study will investigate how high school character education affects the experiences of four college students. Specifically, how do four college students who received high school character education experience those lessons in the college context? The focus on college students advances the field by extending the conversation beyond the high school years and is important because character education aims to impact students for a lifetime, beyond high school graduation. This study serves to address the existing gap in the literature by focusing on college student experience. This investigation extends the current line of inquiry to focus specifically on student experience, with participants who have progressed beyond the high school environment into college.

**Purpose of Study**

Building on the limitations of the existing research, this qualitative, multiple case study was designed to explore how four young adults experience the lasting effects of high school character education in the college environment. A total of four young adults participated in this study. Of interest is the young adult experience, at the individual level and within interactions with others. The results provide insight into those aspects of character education that persist in
the college environment, and spark consideration for how character education programs may serve students once they leave the high school environment.

**Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative research exists in many forms with various strategies and procedures, but the nature of qualitative research relies on a curiosity and interest in human experience. Rather than focusing on cause and effect, developing predictions, or describing the population through a sample (all common hallmarks of quantitative work), qualitative methods aim to understand individual experience, context, and meaning (Merriam, 2009). Case study research is one method of qualitative inquiry. Case study research is most appropriate for situations that involve “how” or “why” questions that address a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 2014, p. 14). Further, case study research “explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, of one or more individuals” (Stake, 1995 in Merriam, 2003, p. 15). A multiple case study approach was selected for this study to address “how” questions related to college students’ experience with character education (outside of the researcher’s control), aiming to provide in-depth analysis of each case, as well as a cross-case analysis, which serves to describe the more general phenomenon across all of the cases.

**Research Questions**

The central question of this multiple case study is: How does high school character education exist in the lives of four young adults in the college environment? Specifically:

1. How do college students identify high school character education in their own high school?
2. How do college students utilize their high school character education?
3. How does the college student’s context shape the utilization of character education?

**Definition of Terms**

The definitions are provided for terms that will be used throughout the study and are important concepts related to the investigation. For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

*Character.* “Knowing, caring about and acting upon core ethical values such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility and respect for self and others” (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999, p. 18).

*Character education.* To help describe the boundaries on their inquiry, Berkowitz and Bier (2005) operationalized character education as, “any school-based K-12 initiatives either intended to promote the development of some aspect of student character or for which some aspect of student character was measured as a relevant outcome variable” (p. 3). This will serve as the definition for this inquiry as well, with a loose interpretation for the term “measure,” referring in this context to something that was valued rather than formally measured. In this definition, “school-based” refers to a school-sponsored initiative (as opposed to those initiatives driven by an individual within a school environment).

*Morals.* The “principles, standards, or habits with respect to right or wrong in conduct” (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1991, p. 882).

*College student.* For the purposes of this study, the term *college student* is limited to describing individuals between the ages of 18-22 years of age who identify as an undergraduate college student living on campus enrolled in a minimum of twelve semester credits.
**Formal character education.** Character education programs developed by researchers, clinicians, or professional organizations that schools may select and implement (likely for a fee). Formal approaches provide the same structure and materials for each school that selects to implement the program.

**Tailored character education.** Character education programs created by stakeholders within the school community, specifically designed to fit the needs of that environment. Based on the framework and intended outcomes developed by the individuals or committee responsible for planning the intervention, the specific activities and curriculum will vary from school-to-school.

**Values.** “The social principles, goals, or standards held or accepted by an individual, class, or society, etc.” (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1991, p. 1474).

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

**Assumptions**

The following assumptions were made for this study:

1. All participants participated without compulsion and responded honestly.
2. The confidentiality of the identity of the participants is protected through pseudonyms.
3. At its essence, character education is implemented with the intention of providing a positive experience that promotes growth, awareness, and development in students.
4. Character education can serve to provide a long-lasting impact for students in their thoughts and actions.
5. Reality is socially constructed, with no single, observable reality. Instead, multiple interpretations of a single event are possible and knowledge is not “found,” but rather is constructed (Merriam, 2009).
6. Exploratory, multiple case study analysis provides an in-depth exploration suitable for generating data and developing a theoretical framework from which to understand a concept or phenomenon.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study are as follows:

1. The findings of this study may be subject to other analyses given that they emerged from the researcher’s interpretation of the data. This limitation is supported by Merriam (1998) who asserts that all data must be interpreted as they cannot speak for themselves.

2. Although this multiple case study may not be generalized to the general population, it provides educators, researchers, and practitioners with valuable examples of college students who experienced high school character education, and the lasting impact of that experience.

3. The personal characteristics of the interviewer, including style, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, etc., will influence the participants’ responses.

Delimitations

As a qualitative study, it is necessary to address the choices that I have made in narrowing the scope of this investigation (Creswell, 1994). By identifying these choices I can also speak to the decision-making process in which I engaged. The delimitations of this study are as follows:

1. *Theoretical Orientation.* As a researcher, my theoretical orientation narrows the scope of the literature review to attend specifically to the concepts and issues that created the foundation for this study. In establishing this theoretical orientation and lens for the
study, I made purposeful decisions in which literature to include (stemming from the Character Education Partnership, Social Emotional Learning, Positive Psychology).

2. **Sampling.** The richness of any case study, including this one, is limited based on the selection criteria established by the researcher. In this study, the selection of participants was conducted through snowball and chain sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007). Four high schools were initially selected from a large Mid-Western city, each having been identified as schools that provide character education for students. Through email and phone conversations, the researcher eliminated three of the four schools that were initially selected because the school counselor either reported that the school did not provide character education as defined in this study, or had begun the programming so recently that current college sophomores would not have experienced the programming during their time in high school. Though the initial high schools were selected to provide a balance between private and public schools (2 private schools, 2 public schools), further investigation and contact with school counselors revealed a lack of public schools that fit the inclusion criteria as schools that identified as providing character education. Ultimately, the sample included three private day schools. Sampling strategies did succeed in the goal of providing a balance of gender identities (2 male-identified students, 2 female-identified students participated in this study). The decisions made throughout the sampling process narrowed the scope of the investigation to exclude any student outside of the selected city and schools, as well as any student not currently enrolled as a full-time college student.
4. **Context.** This case study does not aim to understand the variety of contexts through which students may gain exposure to character development including activities related to settings like church, sports, etc.

3. **Methods.** I selected to use a multiple case study analysis after considering a wide variety of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches. As mentioned previously, case study research is most appropriate for situations that involve “how” or “why” questions (Yin, 2014, p. 14) that address a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control, and seeks to explore “a program, an event, an activity, a process, of one or more individuals” (Stake, 1995 in Merriam, 2003, p. 15). In addition to the goodness of fit between the research interests and methods, I was able to develop a working relationship with a faculty member who is an expert in these methods. This provided me, as a young researcher, with the support necessary to move forward in developing methods and design with appropriate guidance.

With these delimitations in place, trustworthiness, including credibility and rigor, as well as the issue of transferability are foundational issues to consider within this study. Qualitative research, by nature, is nonstandardized, context sensitive, and relies on subjective experiences both with respect to the participant and the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and therefore must be assessed with standards that consider these aspects of design. Hunt (2011) asserts that conducting good qualitative research relies on transparency, which requires that the researcher outline the steps they have taken to, “ensure quality and trustworthiness” (p. 298). As part of this process, I want to specifically address the issues of social validity, subjectivity/reflexivity, credibility, and rigor as they apply to this study (Morrow, Casañeda-Sound, & Abrams, 2012). I will also address transferability as it relates to qualitative research.
Social Validity

This criterion, as presented by Morrow and colleagues (2012) describes the social value of the research as it relates to multicultural competence and social justice. In this study, participants were selected through purposive sampling with intention to give voice to a mixture of gender, racial, and ethnic identities. In addition to balancing gender across participants, school counselors were encouraged to recommend racial and ethnic minority students. Ultimately, gender was balanced across the participants in this study, but little racial or ethnic diversity was represented.

Subjectivity/Reflexivity

The process of self-reflection is imperative as part of the recognition of researcher as the main tool for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007). By engaging in reflective processes including bracketing and a statement of positionality I, the researcher, worked to establish and maintain transparency throughout my inquiry. In addition, I maintained a journal detailing any and all activities related to the conceptualization and execution of this study including ideas, summaries of conversations and meetings, initial brainstorms for codes and themes, etc. This journal ultimately existed as both a tool for and product of data analysis.

Credibility

As described by Merriam (2009), credibility refers to the extent to which research findings match reality, or the extent to which the researchers measure what they believe they measure. One strategy to promote credibility within a study is through the use of peer debriefers, which I used in this study as an external check throughout my research process (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, I maintained an established connection with a peer debriefer who is knowledgeable and experienced regarding school counseling and character education.
Rigor

Rigor describes the need for adequacy of interpretation (Morrow et al., 2012). This process requires “immersion in the data, a systematic and well-thought-out analytic strategy, and writing that offers a balance of the researcher’s interpretation and participants’ supporting quotes” (Morrow et al., 2012, p. 111). Member checking was one specific strategy employed through this study to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness. I consulted with participants to review main concepts and ideas that emerged from the interview process. These conversations primarily occurred over email. I provided each participant with an initial narrative summary of our interview and later provided the rough draft version case-by-case analysis for that participant.

Transferability

The role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry is, in part, to present the findings in such a way that readers may decide the extent to which the findings may be applied to another context or setting (Hunt, 2011). In order for this to happen, readers must be provided with information about the researcher, the context in which the research was conducted (including a description of the participants), and the nature of the interactions between the researcher and the participants (Morrow, 2005). By providing this information, the researcher allows the reader to draw their own conclusions regarding the extent to which the findings of the research may be relevant to their specific context (Morrow, 2005).

Significance of the Study

The findings from the current investigation have implications for counseling research and practice. First, research on character education has not addressed the experience of students beyond the high school environment or the ways in which their experiences with character
education exist in the college environment. Second, explorations into experiences of character education have failed to give voice to recipient of these programs, the student. This approach focuses on the student as the target of character education and giving students voice in their experience. Finally, this study is unique due to its methodology, as a qualitative, multiple-case study. An investigation grounded in qualitative methods allows participants to describe their experiences based on what has been meaningful in their own, personal experience. Multiple case study approaches allow for cross-case comparison as a way to reveal similarities across the students, while at the same time recognizing and emphasizing the role of context (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). This allows for a more complex understanding of both the individual student experiences and the phenomenon of interest.

College counselors might consider the ways in which high school character education impacts the college experience, recognizing the potential benefits for those students who received character education as part of their high school experience, and the potential disadvantage for those students who did not receive character education during their high school years. This awareness might prepare college counselors to consider ways to bolster or continue character development in the college environment. Additionally, the study may be of use to researchers and practitioners interested in multiple case study research and qualitative research in general. This study was conducted and results reported with each of these audiences in mind. This study may provide educators, school counselors, and practitioners who are interested in developing and implementing character education programs in the high school environment.

**Overview of Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter one offers an introduction to character education and the specific research questions of the study. The second chapter provides
an in-depth summary of the literature as well as the researcher’s personal knowledge and experience relevant to the study. Chapter three outlines the research methods for the study, including sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter four provides the results of the case-by-case analysis. Chapter five reports the results of the cross-case analysis. The final chapter, chapter six, serves to provide discussion, limitations, implications, and recommendations based on the findings.
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study is to explore how four young adults experience the lasting effects of high school character education in the college environment. This section embraces the qualitative notion of a conceptual framework, outlining the “system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories” that underlie and direct this research (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33). In developing this section, I promote transparency and contribute to the overall trustworthiness of the study by describing the relationships I see among the various concepts explored through this study recognizing that my perspective is influenced by my experience and environment. This chapter provides a foundation for this study through an exploration of my background and beliefs as the researcher, as well a description of the prior theory and research related to the college student experience, character strengths, and character education. Taken together, this chapter serves to establish the context in which the study was conducted.

Researcher Positionality

As the main tool for data collection and analysis, it is imperative that I, the researcher, identify and describe the philosophical assumptions behind my research method and design, recognizing that the way I view the topic of character education shapes my approach to this research, influencing why I ask the questions I ask, how I select my methods, and my basic purpose in conducting this study. This statement of researcher positionality makes explicit the biases, assumptions, and experiences that shape my perspective as a researcher. Of particular interest I outline ontology, axiology, epistemology, and rhetoric (Creswell, 2007, Wang, 2012). 

Ontology

In exploring my ontological assumptions, my research is driven by a belief in multiple realities, and the idea that each viewpoint is subjective and equally valid. My epistemological
paradigm as a qualitative researcher describes my approach to understanding reality as a social construction, rather than an objective truth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, I must rely on my participants to describe their experiences and worldview, and honor their interpretation by giving voice to their ideas. In approaching this study, I must also make clear that I, the researcher, exist as a result of my own unique background and experiences, which contribute to the ways in which I understand and interpret the world. With this recognition, I acknowledge that my personal values influence the topic and design of this study. Specifically, I place high value on character, education, and giving voice to the individual.

Axiology

The concept of character has been significant and visible in my life since childhood, heavily present in family life and sports. A common family activity involved my mother reading stories aloud from *The Book of Virtues* (Bennett, 1996) during bedtime or car trips. Through my involvement in sports I was exposed to a variety of coaches over the course of my childhood and adolescence, many of whom promoted character as an integral part of success. The importance of education has also been highly valued throughout my life. Family vacations were typically centered on visiting some historical or literary landmark, with constant reminders of the importance of being “lifelong learners.” Only in the last decade have I come to understand the value I place on giving voice to the individual, and I attribute this realization to my experience in my graduate training for counseling. First through my clinical work and then through my qualitative coursework, I began to identify the power of careful listening, and the impact that connection can have for both the speaker and the listener in understanding human experience.
Epistemology

I aim to position myself within this research by acknowledging my relationship as the researcher to what is being studied (Creswell, 2007). Although I did not receive character education as it is described throughout this study, I do attribute a great deal of my own character development to the efforts made by individuals within my high school environment, and I believe that the lasting nature of those lessons persisted into my college life and even continues today. My recollection of character development efforts during my high school years surround individual relationships that I established and maintained with significant role models, each of whom influenced my thoughts and behaviors as they relate to issues of honesty, commitment, work ethic, kindness, and caring for others. As a high school student, I relied on both their modeling and direct instruction related to appropriate ways to establish and pursue goals, address challenges, and treat others. In addition to service as models, each of these individuals also presented me with opportunities to embrace leadership roles, challenged me to step outside of my comfort zone, and helped me learn from mistakes by engaging in honest and supportive dialogue. I believe there is an important need for high school students to have intentional and prosocial models for what it means to live with character, as well as opportunities to practice skills and learn from mistakes. I acknowledge my privilege in having access to these role models and recognize that not all high school students gain these kinds of relationships during these formative years, especially in environments that do not promote an intentional school-wide effort at character development.

Rhetoric

In my writing I intend to provide a new lens through which to view and discuss character education, focusing on student experience and voice. My intention is to share multiple
perceptions and present the information in clear and accessible language. I employ the first person narrative in order to remind you of the subjective nature of this process and to emphasize my presence throughout the study. I strive to write in a way that engages and informs, providing rich descriptions of each case to provide each reader with a sense that they know the case and can understand the context and the individual. Rather than taking an expert role, my purpose is to prompt a discussion regarding character education and student experience, as well as the importance of qualitative methodology.

**Theoretical Lens**

The extant literature has explored character education from many angles, developing an assortment of paths to understand the purpose, implementation, and outcomes of these initiatives. In this review, I aim to integrate this variety of theories and frameworks to create a foundational representation of the current state of knowledge surrounding character education. I also address the developmental and environmental influences affecting college students as a means for establishing the context in which college students live. In a broader sense, I approach this review from a strengths-based perspective and aim to identify and describe the ways in which character development and character education serve to promote both short- and long-term benefits for students. As a researcher and clinician, I embrace a strengths-based perspective grounded in Positive Psychology and work to recognize and enhance those aspects of each individual that promote happiness, well-being, and authenticity. I believe that each human has the capacity for good and is intrinsically motivated to pursue activities and relationships that contribute to self-actualization. In this process, external pressures may result in deviations from optimal development, and individuals benefit greatly from opportunities for practice as they acquire new
skills. I also embrace a developmental perspective, in which human growth and maturity are marked by central tasks during each stage of development.

My strengths-based, developmental perspective shapes the questions that I ask, the methods I select, and the basic interest in conducting this study (my theoretical lens). I understand character education to be “any school-based K-12 initiatives either intended to promote the development of some aspect of student character or for which some aspect of student character was measured as a relevant outcome variable” where “school-based” refers to a school-sponsored initiative (as opposed to those initiatives driven by an individual within a school environment; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Together, this review of the literature includes three main sections. First, I describe the student transition to the college environment, focusing on developmental and environmental influences. Next, I describe the foundations of character education, specifically focusing on character strengths. I conclude the review with an exploration of specific examples of character education programs, effectiveness, and outcomes. Taken together, these sections are intended to establish a lens through which to understand the college student experience and the role character education may potentially have in that environment.

**Student Transition to the College Environment**

The transition from high school to the college environment represents a variety of significant tasks, challenges, and opportunities. College students are likely to be dealing with issues of separation as students establish themselves outside of their parents’ home, decreasing their dependence on their families and high school context (Grayson, 1989). Individuals at age 18 are also likely to be dealing with issues of both identity and intimacy, as proposed in Erikson’s (1950, 1968) model of psychosocial stages. During this time, individuals work to resolve the adolescent stage (identity vs. role confusion) and embark on the young adult stage
(intimacy and solidarity vs. isolation; Erikson, 1950, 1968). More recent work considers the time from the late teens through the twenties as a significant time of development for young people in industrialized counties as they establish the foundation for their personal and professional futures. Arnett (2000) describes this stage of development as “emerging adulthood,” which, rather than bridging adolescence and young adulthood, represents a distinct stage characterized by independence from social roles and typical adult expectations. This emerging adulthood takes into account relatively recent demographic changes related to marriage and parenthood, both of which are more delayed now compared to the time Erikson was developing his model (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is described as a “new term for a new phenomenon,” marked by a time of exploration and possibility as individuals explore their options related to love, work, and worldview (Arnett, 2007, p. 68; Arnett, 2000).

The period of development between 18 and 25 presents a great deal of variability with respect to experience, with about one in three emerging adults entering the college environment after finishing high school (Arnett, 2000). During this time, students confront opportunities for growth with respect to building values, competencies, attitudes, beliefs, identity, relationships, and self-concept, all while working through trial and error to reach developmental goals related to separation, identity formation, and intimacy (Boyer, 1987; Grayson, 1989; Lounsbury et al., 2009). Emerging adulthood also represents the peak age period for a variety of risky behaviors including binge drinking, drug use, risky sexual behavior, and risky driving behavior (Arnett, 2000, 2005, 2007; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). With each new opportunity and challenge, individuals are faced with the decision to respond in adaptive or maladaptive ways, drawing on the skills and resources they have developed over the course of their life up to that point as they move toward independence.
Specifically, college students must manage identity formation, intimacy, and separation as they learn to manage an increasingly flexible schedule, generally with much more unsupervised and potentially unstructured time than their high school environment allowed. Even students who maintain full-time employment in addition to their course load are likely to experience less parental/adult supervision, and as a result more unstructured time, than during their high school years. The college environment presents an opportunity for students to take control of structuring their day, making decisions about how they will direct their energy, and toward what targets (school work, social activities, video games, etc.). For many, the combination of a relatively free schedule and limited supervision results in a tendency to exist on an extreme, whether it be playing videogames until early morning hours or putting off studying until an all-night session is required in order to learn course material (Grayson, 1989). Wrapped up in these decisions, students must manage the developmental tasks at play related to establishing who they are and how they relate to others, all in a new environment. College student experience is shaped by both individual development related to separation, identity formation, and intimacy, and the environmental context in which they address these tasks.

**Separation**

For college students leaving the home, separation involves more than just physically moving onto the college campus. Developmentally speaking, the process of separation involves social and emotional adjustments far greater than the physical move from home to school. This process, which likely began prior to the official college “move-in” date, exists as a flexible progression between connection and separation and moves at a gradual pace based on the readiness of the individual (Grayson, 1989). To complicate the process, studies show that emerging adults have the highest rate of residential mobility during their mid-twenties and may
be in the position of moving back into their childhood home and then out again as they establish their financial and professional foundation (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Many students continue to rely on parents for financial, emotional, and other forms of support throughout late adolescence/emerging adulthood, and must renegotiate the terms of the relationship in order to effectively achieve this developmental stage through adaptive means of coping.

College students’ sense of independence and attitudes toward separation may influence their experience during this process. Researchers have demonstrated a significantly high and positive relationship between one subscale of independence among university students and various aspects of adjustment to college including academic and personal-emotional adjustment (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Haemmerlie, Steen, & Benedicto, 1994; Hoffman, 1984; Hoffman & Weiss, 1987). Additionally, Beyers and Goossens (2008) suggest that students who harbor negative or resentful feelings related to separation, or who experience loneliness or alienation due to separation during the adjustment to college, may be especially at risk during their adjustment. Students who feel prepared and capable are better equipped to navigate the potential emotional and psychological challenges that come with separation, and will be able to focus their efforts and attention toward developing their own sense of self.

Identity Formation

The task of identity formation is complex and continuous throughout adolescence and young adulthood (Grayson, 1989; Arnett, 2000). College students within this stage of development must work to integrate their childhood identifications, aptitudes, and opportunities in forming a sense of identity for themselves (Grayson, 1989). This process requires self-awareness and knowledge, and ultimately provides the foundation on which individuals base critical life decisions and commitments (Grayson, 1989). For emerging adults, identity focuses
the direction toward significant decisions including which major to pursue and a general career direction, as well as political and religious affiliations/values, sexual values, and social systems (Azmitia et al., 2013; Grayson, 1989). Identity formation can serve to help students find a role and function within the college environment, impacting the overall success of the adjustment (Adams, Ryan, & Keating, 2000; Azmitia et al., 2013; Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011).

For students entering the college environment, the process of identity formation extends from the high school world into a new world full of options. This presents an opportunity to recreate oneself in a new environment and students who attend residential colleges away from family and friends are more likely to reformulate their identity (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008). Individuals who arrive to college without a foundation of self-awareness and knowledge may struggle to find their niche, unable to recognize those aspects of their college environment that will provide a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction (courses, peer groups, extracurriculars, etc.). This sense of belonging is associated with mental health and retention (Bean, 2005; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Johnson et al., 2007; Leaper, Farkas, & Brown, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pinel, Warner & Chua, 2005; Zea, Jarama, & Trotta-Bianchi, 1995).

It is important to note that the process of identity exploration can be stressful for some individuals (Azmitia et al., 2013; Luyckx et al., 2008). Specifically, students from ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups that are minorities within their college campuses are more likely to face obstacles including a lack of peers and role models who share their background (Azmitia et al., 2013; Azmitia et al., 2008; Cooper, 2011; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Leaper et al., 2012; Orbe, 2008; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Syed, 2010; Syed et al., 2011). Without these peers and models for identity development, students from underrepresented groups may lack the support network that promotes a successful transition, including connections with university staff.
and peers (Azmitia et al., 2013; Cooper, Behrens, & Trihn, 2009). Separated from family, often for the first time, students from underrepresented populations face the task of identity formation without the kind of network that can provide protection and support. According to Arnett (2000), the process of identity formation is a key feature of emerging adulthood and involves exploring options related to love, connecting this concept directly to that of intimacy, which will be addressed in the next section.

**Intimacy**

As students leave their high school social network and enter into the college environment they are challenged by the need to establish new peer relationships. Although some students may have little or no trouble forming new friendships to fulfill their basic need for intimacy, others are likely to experience difficulty filling that void and may experience isolation and loneliness (Grayson, 1989). Interpersonal awareness and skills are necessary in establishing prosocial connections in fostering and developing the relationships that can provide students with the intimacy of friendship and/or romance. Arnett (2000) notes that romantic relationships move from adolescent notions of initial exposure to romantic love and sexual experimentation and focus more on exploring the potential for emotional and physical intimacy during emerging adulthood. In this sense, romantic involvement moves way from an immediate set of desired characteristics (potentially for a short-lived encounter) and toward a consideration of those qualities and characteristics that might contribute to a more lasting relationship (Arnett, 2000).

College students living on campus are also faced with the challenge of living with peers, potentially sharing a room for the first time. While establishing themselves in a new environment, college students seek to create a new network for support, security, and need fulfillment, all of which require close relationships (McDonald & Asher, 2013). In addition to
establishing romantic partners, relationships with friends and roommates are also likely to become sources of intimacy and support (Berg, 1984; McDonald & Asher, 2013). Romantic relationships and friendships overlap with respect to their functions in providing closeness and support (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009). Whereas romantic partners primarily satisfy the need for emotional support and intimacy, friendships provide companionship, feelings of worth, and social integration (Barry et al., 2009).

Peer networks have the potential to provide emotional support and encourage academic goals as well as an appreciation for diversity of background and perspective, although there may be important limits to their impact (Boisjoly, Duncan, Kremer, Levy, & Eccles, 2006; Grayson, 1989). Boisjoly et al. (2006) investigated the relationship between individuals’ connection with members of other racial/ethnic groups and their attitudes toward those groups, specifically by investigating the attitudes and behaviors of White college students randomly assigned roommates of various racial/ethnic backgrounds. Researchers found that White college students randomly assigned African American roommates reported more positive attitudes toward affirmative action and diversity policies, and interacted more comfortably with minorities several years after entry into college than White students who were assigned White roommates. These same white students, however, were no more likely to endorse goals like helping to “eliminate discrimination against people of color” or “promote racial understanding” (Boisjoly et al., 2006, p. 1901). The authors of this study concluded that their results fit into the larger conversation around the impact roommates have on attitudes and behaviors related toward racial minority groups, but may not impact the extent to which students socialize with someone from another racial/ethnic group or develop long-term goals related to valuing diversity (Boisjoly et al., 2006). The study only gathered data from White students, presenting a single perspective on cross-
racial/ethnic connections in the experience of interracial roommate assignments. Despite this limitation, the findings may suggest that being comfortable with someone does not translate directly to increased support. In terms of intimacy, there can be an important difference for students between appreciating a person or group and developing that appreciation into a connection and source of active support.

Throughout these processes of separation, identity formation, and intimacy, college students must also manage a variety of opportunities for decision-making, some of which may result from new and unfamiliar situations. Students face academic and social pressures related to honesty, caring, and responsibility that can test their commitment to these values. In the 2012 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, researchers found that ethics and character were highly regarded by high school students with 99% of students agreeing that “it is important for me to be a person with good character” (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2012). Clearly, character is a valued aspect of identity formation as individuals work to develop a sense of who they are and how they see themselves. High school students also perceive the potential pressures ahead, with 57% of students agreeing with the statement, “in the real world, successful people do what they have to do to win, even if others consider it cheating” and about 1 in 3 students agreed that, “a person has to lie or cheat sometimes in order to succeed” (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2012). These responses indicate a tension between the developmental tasks (identity formation and intimacy) and success. Students appear to identify and value the importance of developing good character, but may also recognize that a set of conflicting values might be required to get what they want out of life (cheating, lying). When these two forces converge, students are faced with making a decision between identity and intimacy (staying true to oneself and honoring their relationships) or compromising those values in order to get ahead.
Although this survey is limited to high school participants, these data suggest that students need to be equipped with tools to promote decision-making based on the values of character as students enter the college environment and are thrown into a world of new opportunities and pressures whether it be academic honesty or responding to negative peer pressure. In the college context, students face the intersection of aspiration and reality as they decide how they will balance ethical behavior and the desire to succeed while also working to separate from parents, establish their identity, and form meaningful and fulfilling relationships with others. A successful transition to the college environment may rely on students having a clear sense of who they are and making decisions that are consistent with their goals, values, and expectations (Azmitia et al., 2013).

**Foundations of Character Education**

Within the struggles to establish separation, identity, and intimacy in the new environment, college students rely on coping skills and strategies as they manage uncertainty and ambiguity, finding security in a new environment, dealing with issues of inadequacy and self-esteem, decision-making, and commitment to life goals (Arnett, 2000; Azmitia et al., 2013; Grayson, 1989; McDonald & Asher, 2013). As students leave their high schools and enter into the college environment, the tools that they bring with them help shape their experience and level of success. Character education represents one opportunity for schools to provide intentional, direct instruction for interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge and skills. Though college students face a breadth and depth of developmental and environmental challenges, this time is also rich with opportunities as students move toward establishing themselves as motivated and capable, and rather than becoming overwhelmed, students may use this as an opportunity to identify, develop, and utilize their strengths in pursuing passion, happiness, and success.
Defining Character

In the past decade, psychology has experienced a shift in focus from a deficit-driven approach to the treatment of mental disorders and disruptions to developmental progress. This new focus, captured by the term Positive Psychology, emphasizes prevention through the promotion of human strengths and virtues that may buffer individuals from mental disorders and instead strive toward lives of meaning and satisfaction (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Character and Character Education have received renewed attention from researchers in the fields of education and Positive Psychology.

The Character Education Partnership (CEP) is a national advocacy organization that defines character as, “knowing, caring about and acting upon core ethical values such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility and respect for self and others” (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999, p. 18). The CEP is an umbrella organization for character education, and has developed and refined a tool called the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education, which can be used to evaluate character education and will be explored more fully later in this review. In 1992, the nonprofit Josephson Institute of Ethics gathered experts in ethics and character education to establish common language for discussing ethical values. The ethicists, educators, and youth-service professionals developed what is now known as the Six Pillars of Character, outlining six specific aspects of character including trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. About a year later, the Institute launched CHARACTER COUNTS!, a movement built on the Six Pillars. The Pillars are one way for students to explore the question, “What is character?” treating each as a universal value, serving to provide the foundation for ethical decision-making. Across organizations and definitions, research and practitioners agree that character develops over time. Although the efforts made by the Character Education
Partnership and through the CHARACTER COUNTS! program focus on school-aged children and adolescents, it is reasonable to expect that character plays well beyond the elementary, middle, and high school environments. Character continues to develop as college students establish their sense of identity and purpose, engage in decision-making processes that will impact their life trajectory, and pursue positions within society as thinkers, workers, and leaders.

On an individual level, we can consider character from a developmental perspective, emerging over the course of the lifetime. Berkowitz (2002) highlights that it is not until adolescence (11 or 12 years of age) that individuals become mainly prosocial, which directly impacts the way adolescents understand and evaluate what is right and wrong. Within this theory of human development, we understand how children progress from a self-orientation to begin to recognize and value the “impact of their behaviors on others, their relationships with others, and the social organizations of which they are members” (Berkowitz, 2002, p. 53). The struggle to determine what is right and wrong is necessary for each individual, especially as one enters into a new environment and/or faces new challenges.

One helpful framework that may guide school counselors was developed by Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov (2008). In this framework, character has two parts: moral character and performance character. The distinction between moral and performance character marks a relatively recent development in the literature. This distinction provides an integrated approach to understanding the need to provide students with direction for developing prosocial skills and competencies for success. Performance character describes the qualities required to realize one’s full potential across environments including academic, career, and throughout life. These qualities include diligence, perseverance, positive attitude, discipline, and work ethic (Davidson et al, 2008). Moral character includes those values and skills that allow individuals to treat
themselves and others with respect and care, and enable students to live with integrity while honoring the interests of others (Davidson et al., 2008). In a basic sense, moral character describes qualities like empathy and integrity that promote ethical relationships, while performance character relates more closely to the ability to regulate thoughts and actions to support achievement (e.g. self-discipline; Davidson et al., 2008). This distinction is helpful in understanding character education not only as helping students move away from negative outcomes (less cheating, lying, violence, etc.) but also moving toward becoming their best selves by learning to give their best effort regardless of environment (Davidson et al., 2008).

**Character Strengths**

The potential for strong character exists within each individual, emerging throughout maturity. Good character has been described as a family of positive traits that are reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Park, 2006). In the field of Positive Psychology these traits are termed character strengths and describe positive individual traits like the capacity for love, forgiveness, and wisdom, as well as group level qualities including altruism and work ethic (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyia, 2000). Authors have proposed that character strengths can help us to understand the characteristics that contribute to optimal human development, peak performance, and the well-being of society. Character strengths have been shown to have a buffer effect for youth; and can serve to support individual well-being (Park, 2006; Quinlan et al., 2011).

Recognizing that individual behavior is contextual, Isaacowitz and associates (2003) investigated character strengths in young adults, middle-aged individuals, and older adults, hypothesizing that the different age groups would endorse using different strengths based on their context and developmental. The hypothesis was supported. Young adults were shown to
report higher levels of strengths that related to exploring the world such as originality, and was found as a unique predictor of life satisfaction (Isaacowitz et al., 2003).

In terms of individual benefits, research surrounding character development in the high school context has found that character strengths knowledge and use are significantly associated with each other, highlighting an important relationship between learning about individual strengths and then intentionally exercising those strengths in our daily lives (Govindji & Linley, 2007). A positive relationship has been demonstrated between character strengths use and measures of subjective well-being, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and health related quality of life (Proctor, 2011; Proctor et al., 2010). Character strengths knowledge and use have also been shown to promote an appreciation for diversity and strengths promotion as students begin to recognize and value authenticity (Proctor, 2011). Seligman and colleagues (2009) suggest that the promotion of well-being through intentional activities in school may serve as an antidote to depression, as a vehicle for increasing life satisfaction, and as an aid to better learning and more creative thinking.

Based on the findings surrounding the importance of character and character strengths, there has been a push to arm children with the tools they may need to help them reach their potential while guarding against negative behaviors. The specific ways in which character develops varies from person to person, with family and community as significant influences for all young people exploring what it means to contribute as a member of society. In addition to the family and community, schools also play an important role in the development of character (Berkowtz & Bier, 2004). With this awareness, teachers, administrators, and counselors across the country have made a conscious effort to implement character development programming into the school environment, ultimately aiming to promote the social and emotional competencies
students need to thrive (Park, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character education is one
means for providing students with direct and intentional guidance and skill-practice in
developing character strengths.

**Character Education**

In the K-12 environment, school counselors have acknowledged and reinforced their
unique opportunity to promote character development, working to impact the individual,
interpersonal, and organizational levels within the school (Britzman, 2005; Cali, 1997). Through
their role working with students, teachers, administrators, families, and community members,
school counselors interact with a wide variety of stakeholders within the context of the school
and have the opportunity to instruct and model behaviors for students related to healthy decision-
making and prosocial skills as a means for promoting positive outcomes for students (ASCA,
2011). In a position paper produced by the American School Counseling Association (2011)
titled, “The Professional School Counselor and Character Education,” the national organizing
body asserts that character education initiatives are consistent with the ASCA National Model
(2003). Although school counselors often face obstacles in gaining support from school
administrators, parents, and community members in implementing school-wide programming,
school counselors are called to “endorse and actively support” character education programming
in the school setting (ASCA, 2011, p. 4) and may be well-positioned to influence the selection
and implementation of that programming. In a general sense, character education efforts aim to
provide direct instruction to assist students in developing the knowledge, skills, and perspective
to become life-long learners, develop healthy relationships, and contribute to society in
meaningful ways (Sojourner, 2012).
What Does Character Education Encompass?

In selecting a program or approach to implementing character education in the school environment, school counselors may find their exploration into character education confusing and complex, and often characterized by, “a massive collection of advice, unfortunately often conflicting…frequently not based in scientific evidence and theory” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014, p. 248). Even in the academic literature, one obstacle to accessibility in the discussion of character education is the language and definition used to describe the research. Although a detailed account of the evolution and intersection of the various pathways to character education is beyond the scope of this review (see Berkowitz & Bier, 2005), the promotion of positive youth development in the school environment has been addressed through moral education, values education, child development, social-emotional learning, primary prevention, positive youth development, and youth empowerment (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014). The boundaries among these approaches are poorly defined, despite the overwhelming similarities.

Who is the Focus of Character Education?

Another potential obstacle for school counselors in identifying and selecting a character education program is deciphering the intended beneficiary of the programming, namely either the student or the school. These two categories overlap substantially, and many schools are likely interested in affecting both the individual student (well-being, academic achievement) and the overall school culture (delinquency, violence). Further, it is imprudent to suggest that a school-wide program implemented to impact students at an individual level would not also affect the overall school culture, or visa versa. However, the distinction is still an important one as we move to discuss outcomes of character education. Depending on the focus, students may experience character education differently, potentially either as the intended target or as a tool
for improving/stabilizing the school environment. In the first case, students may experience the lessons as helpful, meaningful, and relevant to their own personal development, or as unnecessary or disconnected from academic pursuits. In the latter case, students may recognize their role as a member of the larger school community and the impact their actions and values have on the school as a whole, or may feel as though the programming is a tool designed to control or manage the school environment. Due to the lack of research on student experience as part of character education programming, little is known regarding how students perceive these activities and programs.

Schools today face significant concerns related to student safety and well-being including teen violence, drug use, sexual activity, and suicide rates in addition to a downward trend in academic performance, creating a challenging context in which to provide consistent and positive learning conditions (Beets et al., 2009; Davidson et al., 2008; Leming, 2006; Park, 2004). Character education programs can target the creation of a safe, caring, and controlled school environment as one means for promoting a favorable classroom environment for teaching and learning. The Developmental Studies Center has demonstrated that students’ view of their school as a caring community serves a mediating effect for reading comprehension as well as other academic indicators (Schaps, Watson, & Lewis, 1996), highlighting the important relationship between school environment and achievement. The promotion of good character can be seen as an attempt to address the absence of good character and in doing so, correct or prevent anti-social or destructive behavior in students including academic dishonesty, bullying, substance use, and sexual activity (Davidson et al., 2008).

Character education efforts may also provide a more direct approach to developing student strengths to prepare students for all phases of life well beyond the immediate impacts
that have been shown in the school environment. Identifying and supporting unique strengths may serve to maximize potential through direct instruction related to character development in students (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Wisdom and research both support the idea that students who feel safe and cared for in their school environment are more likely to realize academic achievement (Beland, 2003; Lickona, 2004; Schwartz, Beatty, & Dachnowicz, 2006), and yet safe and caring environments may not automatically include an intentional effort to identity and develop individual student strengths.

**Examples of Character Education**

Character education programs and curriculums exist in many forms, but all are united by the intentional effort to develop character in students. While one school may elect to implement a formal program developed by researchers or found online, another school may design their own approach, unique to their needs and environment. Selecting a formal, standardized, approach may benefit schools by outlining and providing the structure and materials required for the programing. These formal programs are more likely to have been researched, have an established score and sequence, and consequently require less ongoing maintenance. With respect to limitations, formal approaches are less flexible than one designed for a specific environment and may not provide the same goodness of fit as one tailored for the needs of a school and the students within that school. Tailored approaches depend on the knowledge, experience, and follow through of stakeholders in developing, implementing, and monitoring the intervention within the school. By knowing the environment, the needs of the students, and the available resources within the school, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders may be able to design and tailor a character education program without the expense of purchasing a curriculum.
Formal approaches. The Positive Action program is one example of a structured character education program that has been implemented and studied on a school-wide level. This comprehensive, school-based program aims to promote character and student behavior by emphasizing the relationship between thoughts, actions, and feelings with the basic philosophy being, “You feel good about yourself when you do positive actions” (Flay, DuBois, Allread, & Ji, 2008). The program contains five prepared components including the K-12 curriculum, programs for counselors, families, and the community, and a climate development component to promote the program within the school. The counselor’s kit may be used with individual students, small groups, and families. The family kit has weekly home lessons that parallel with those being taught in the school environment. The community kit contains materials to promote collaboration between the school, families, and community members to increase involvement (including media messages and community messages and activities). The classroom curriculum includes more than 1,200 lessons lasting a 15-20 minutes duration, with manuals and materials for each grade. The K-6 manual, for example, includes 140 lessons intended to last 15 minutes each, utilizing activities including role-playing, stories, questions, poetry, and games, as well as puppets, stickers, music, and student activity booklets for up to 30 students. Although information and research are widely available regarding Positive Action in the elementary school environment, there are not currently any studies with high school students using this program.

The Positive Action program has been examined within the elementary school environment in Hawaii, Chicago, and Florida. In one study, the Positive Action program was used in 20 public elementary schools in Hawaii. The researchers followed students from first and second grade (beginning during the 2001-2002 school year) through fifth grade (2005-2006 for the first grade and 2004-2005 for the second grade cohort; Beets et. al, 2009). The program itself
used social and character development lessons to address issues like self-concept, decision-making, and self-awareness (Beets et al., 2009). Each grade level (kindergarten through 12th grade) worked with a curriculum including a year’s worth of lessons, totaling about 35 hours of material (based on a 35-week school calendar; Beets et al., 2009). The lessons were divided into six major units including self-concept, mind and body positive actions, social and emotional actions for managing oneself responsibly, getting along with others, being honest with yourself, and self-improvement (Beets et al., 2009). Teachers and students engaged in structured discussions and activities including games, role-playing, and skill practice (Beets et al., 2009).

The results found that students who participated in this program had an overall lower prevalence rate for the negative behaviors (substance use, violent behaviors, and sexual activity) compared to students who experienced the control (school as usual) group (Beets et al., 2009).

Positive Action represents a complete and thorough program for developing character in students, providing schools with the resources and directives necessary to implement the intervention across the school, family, and community contexts. The research supports the impact of the program within the elementary school environment, but the program has not been investigated in the high school setting. Further, the research methods have emphasized standardized scores on achievement and behavior, and in doing so have not given voice to the experiences of the students involved in the programming. Long-term follow-ups are also needed to understand the impact that this program may have on students beyond the K-12 environment, extending into college.

Another example of a formal approach is called Building Decision Skills. Building Decision Skills consists of multiple components including a series of 10 lessons that can be completed in consecutive days over the course of two weeks, or may be completed over a longer
period of time (Leming, 2001). The curriculum itself was designed to help middle school and high school students recognize the need for sound ethics and decision making by defining the shared values of their community and engage in an exploration of ethical dilemmas to provide an opportunity for students to practice the decision-making techniques introduced through the program (Leming, 2001). Typical components of this program include readings and handouts used for covering initial concepts, followed by time for reflection as well as small group activities, class discussions, and homework assignments within the classroom setting, and finally school wide components like assemblies, group discussions, and seminars.

In one study, 110 high school students participated in an elective course combining the Building Decision Skills curriculum and service learning (Lemming, 2001). Classes began by reviewing group rules and organizing the community service activities through which the students’ efforts would benefit others (recycling program, soup kitchen, tutoring). Students spent part of their class time each week engaging in these activities, and also used class time to relay and examine their experiences, as well as discuss ethical decision making both as it related to their hands-on experience and also in a more broad sense (ethical issues that adolescents must face related to personal and social issues; Lemming, 2001). Students who participated in this program (as opposed to the 193 students who engaged in community service without an expressed ethical component and the 173 students with no community service experience) were found to be more aware of ethical dimensions of scenarios that were presented to them, and also demonstrated a higher sense of ethical responsibility than the other groups. Interestingly, this study represents the only research publication related to this program. The larger body responsible for the programming, the Institute for Global Ethics, now appears to emphasize a
Tailored approach to working with corporations, schools, and other organizations in developing ethical decision-making (http://www.globalethics.org/Where-We-Work.aspx).

**Tailored approaches.** While Positive Action and Building Decision Skills represent comprehensive school-wide programs that administrators and stakeholders may select and utilize as character education, character education may also emerge in a variety of ways, from the voice of a single concerned parent, teacher, or administrator, an organized group like a Parent Teacher Association, a core of faculty members, or as an attempt to distinguish the school among local or regional rivals. Regardless of motivation, once a school decides to move toward a character education intervention, the decision becomes between selecting or developing a program. An individual or team electing to develop a program must settle on a framework and organization for delivery, and may rely on an existing model or create their own for implementing the intervention (Milson, 2000). In addition to avoiding the cost of purchasing a commercial program, schools that develop their own programming may also benefit from the increased flexibility in delivery and a more usable format designed specifically for their environment (Milson, 2000). Further, schools that develop their own programming may benefit from increased buy-in from faculty when the program is developed to partner with the school schedule, curriculum, and other preexisting demands within the environment (Milson, 2000). Schools that opt to develop their own curriculum and programming must also develop materials and attend to issues of staff training, which demand high levels of time and attention but may benefit again from the goodness of fit that comes with a tailored approach. Based on the framework and intended outcomes developed by the individuals or committee responsible for planning the intervention, the specific activities and curriculum will vary from school-to-school.
Character strengths have been taught in schools using story-telling techniques, school-wide festivals and assemblies, and self-focused (reflective) activities that encourage students to identify and consider their own unique strengths (Quinlan et al., 2011). Some character education program designs incorporate activities aimed at promoting the use and development of student signature strengths through strengths-use journals or planning how to use at least one signature strength each day. Studies suggest that strengths knowledge (I know my signature strengths) and strengths use (I use my signature strengths) are related and are associated with subjective well-being, psychological well-being, and subjective vitality (Govindji & Linley, 2007).

Other ways to implement character development in the classroom include role-play scenarios to help students learn and practice effective strengths use, as well as opportunities such as service learning or conflict resolution to offer students a chance to practice good character (Milson, 2000; Shore, 2009). Additionally, programs have emphasized the importance of teachers modeling the traits they teach, and have asked participants to plan or envision how they might use their strengths in the future, how they could use their strengths in new and different ways, or what steps they could take to develop one specific strength or weakness (Milson, 2000; Quinlan et al., 2011). One approach to intervening on student strengths called the “strengths gym” conceptualizes strengths as muscles and provides students with different “exercises” to help “flex” their character strength “muscles” (Proctor et al., 2011). Taken together, there are a variety of ways to access values and decision-making through the school-environment, and school stakeholders may prefer the flexibility that comes with developing a tailored program to fit their environment.
Measuring the Effectiveness of Character Education

Character education efforts look different based on the environment and the program employed within the school, making it difficult to measure or compare effectiveness across environments. Researchers have developed frameworks outlining those aspects of character education that appear to be important across various approaches and environments. These frameworks may be helpful for educators in understanding the pieces that contribute to effective character education. One such framework is The Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education, originally developed by Lickona, Schaps, and Lewis (1995). The Eleven Principles have been revised during the last twenty years (most recently in 2010) and are considered a cornerstone for the Character Education Partnership (CEP). The Principles can be used to evaluate the character of the school, the extent to which the school staff function as character educators, and the apparent character of students (CEP, 2010). Additionally, the Principles provide a foundation for educators and stakeholders aiming to provide excellent programming for students. The Principles outline that effective character education:

(1) promotes core values; (2) defines character to include thinking, feeling, and doing; (3) uses a comprehensive approach; (4) creates a caring community; (5) provides students with opportunities for moral action; (6) offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum; (7) fosters students’ self-motivation; (8) engages staff as a learning community; (9) fosters shared leadership; (10) engages families and community members as partners; and (11) assesses the culture and climate of school. (CEP, 2010, p. 28)
Individually, each component describes one important consideration in developing and assessing character education programming and, taken together, these principles can guide in both the design and evaluation of programming.

The Character Education Partnership encourages educators and practitioners to use the Eleven Principles as a scoring guide to help, “examine their current character education practices, identify short- and long-term objectives, and develop or strengthen a strategic plan for continuous improvement (a template and instructions are available online; CEP, 2010, p. 3). As outlined in the instructions for scoring, schools interested in completing the self-assessment are directed to “assemble a representative group of stakeholders” including “teachers and other staff, administrators, parents, students, community members” (CEP, 2010, p. 27). The group then works together in developing a single score varying from 1 (low) to 4 (high) for a variety of items for each of the Eleven Principles, ultimately averaging out the items to obtain an overall score (CEP, 2010). The Principles and scoring guide provide one means for measuring the effectiveness of the programming, and represents the framework used by the Character Education Partnership in selecting State and National Schools of Character. Although the scoring guide suggests including students in the assessment process, it is reasonable to be cautious when considering the extent to which students are able to openly share their perspective and opinion when grouped with teachers and administrators within their school. Further, the reliance on quantitative data offers little to no insight into the experience of students as recipients of the programming. Taken together, this framework presents an important step in understanding the effectiveness of character education programming by breaking down the programming into meaningful components, but does little to give voice to the stakeholders, specifically students.
The Character Education Partnership and the John Templeton Foundation joined together in 2005 in supporting two researchers, Berkowitz and Bier in developing a comprehensive review of character education research in an attempt to provide assistance for educators interested in implementing character education in their schools, districts, and classrooms. In conducting their review, the researchers collected and reviewed 109 research studies about character education representing 39 different programs and/or methods (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). The authors found the most commonly affected outcomes across these character education programs included socio-moral cognition, pro-social behaviors and attitudes, problem-solving skills, drug use, violence/aggression, school behavior, knowledge/attitudes about risk, emotional competency, academic achievement, attachment to school, general misbehavior, personal morality, and character knowledge (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). The “Most Effectively Affected” outcomes were obtained in the areas of sexual behavior, character knowledge, socio-moral cognition, problem-solving skills, emotional competency, relationships, attachment to school, academic achievement, communicative competency, attitudes toward teachers, violence and aggression, drug use, personal morality, knowledge/attitudes about risk, school behavior, and pro-social behaviors and attitudes. In summarizing their findings, the authors assert that, “character education programs are successful in impacting character development approximately half the time” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 18). Although this may not present an overwhelming case for character education programs, the authors go on to acknowledge that the variables used in their study do not necessarily represent the points of emphasis for the actual character education programs, and that when character education is implemented with intentionality and focus, it “should be effective” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 18). Because research has consistently emphasized quantitative outcomes of character education related to measures of
achievement and behavior, little is known regarding the experience of the students who have received these interventions. The findings presented here also fail to provide long-term implications for character education, although some work has been done to explore the extent to which outcomes related to character education persist.

**Long-term Potential of Character Education**

Research surrounding character education has struggled to establish a solid foundation of universally accepted standards and norms for measuring outcomes and effectiveness. The variety of programs and interventions that exist make it difficult to compare and contrast efforts being made within schools, and the impact that these interventions have on students and the school environment. Not surprisingly, little is known regarding the long-term impact of character education. Positive Action and the Seattle Social Development Project are two programs that have been studied for long-term effects but due to methodological shortcomings, questions still abound in terms of the potential for meaningful impact. Further, research has not focused on the long-term effects of programming offered during the high school years, and research has not focused on the college environment specifically.

Flay and Allread (2003) conducted an investigation into the long-term effects of Positive Action (PA) implemented in elementary schools, specifically looking at student behavior and achievement. In their study, the researchers compared mean scores on standardized testing and school-wide behavioral indicators from middle schools and high schools (including incidents of violence per 100 students, percent of students receiving out-of-school suspensions, percent of students absent for 21 days or more during the school year). Each middle school and high school included in the study was classified by the percentage of students coming from elementary schools that had implemented PA for at least four years for middle schools or eight years for
high schools (low-PA, medium-PA, high-PA; Flay & Allread, 2003). The researchers created matched sets for schools based on the three strongest predictors of student performance shown for the selected school district. The researchers ranked schools based on percent free/reduced lunch, then student turnover, and then based on those rankings, selected schools with similar ethnic distributions. The results of this study found significant differences with respect to violent behavior and suspension rates, as well as on standardized achievement test scores using the Florida Comprehensive Aptitude Test. Schools with more PA graduates scored better, reporting better student behavior, school involvement, and achievement than schools with fewer PA graduates (Flay & Allread, 2003). Data collection occurred at the school-level (rather than the student-level) and did not provide any insight related to student experience of the intervention itself nor did it account for unobserved differences. Further, the study does not shed any light on the effects of PA beyond the high school environment or into adulthood.

Another set of researchers investigated the long-term effects of a different elementary-school-based intervention, the Seattle Social Development Project, which was designed to improve social skills and engagement (Hawkins et al., 2005). The authors found significant effects on broad social and emotional outcomes in a follow-up nine years after the intervention ended where participants ranged between ages 24 to 27 (Hawkins et al., 2005). In this study, participants provided self-reports related to various measures including engagement (hours worked per week), education history, employment status, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, crime, and substance use. Emotional and mental health outcomes described the extent to which participants reported poor emotional regulation as well as responses related to anxiety, social phobia, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Hawkins et al. 2005). Over 40 outcomes were featured in their study, which calls into question the possibility of type-one errors. Overall, the study
seems to suggest a potential for long-term effects of interventions delivered as early as Grades 1-4, but fails to convey compelling evidence for the specific impact, or insight into the specific aspects of the character education program through which students benefitted. Like the study conducted by Flay and Allread (2003), Hawkins and associates (2005) examined an early education intervention where students received programming during the elementary school years and the long-term impact of high school interventions remained unstudied. The effects of character education have not been explored in the college environment, and students have not been given voice in describing their experiences as the focus has been placed on quantitative outcomes instead.

Despite a lack of hard evidence pointing to specific examples of the long-term impact of character education, character strengths have the demonstrated the potential to impact individual success and well-being well beyond the K-12 environment. In a study examining the behaviors of top-level executives, researchers found positive relationships between executive’s performance and ratings of integrity, bravery, and social intelligence using the Values in Action (VIA) measure of character strengths (Sosik, Gentry, & Chun, 2011). Integrity was found to have the strongest relationship to executive performance among the 191 top-level executive participants. These results support the belief that character is an important component of effective leadership and success, although the study did not investigate the source of the executive’s character development. Regardless, the findings suggest that character strengths, specifically integrity, bravery, and social intelligence can play a significant role in success in contexts beyond the high school environment, specifically the business world.

Although character education has been shown to produce short-term effects in the high school environment, inquiries into lasting effects have been unable to generate the kind of
evidence necessary to draw strong conclusions regarding the long-term effects of character education programs. In addition, little is known about how character education influences students in the college environment. College students arrive to the college campus environment armed with varying degrees of experience and training, ultimately setting them up for varying levels of success. Yet there is almost no understanding for how those character education experiences exist once students enter the college environment.

Summary of Literature

My interest in how college students think about character education, their experience in high school, and any lasting effects they see in the college environment led me to undertake this qualitative multiple case study. Taken together, the current state of the literature demonstrates a need for a stronger understanding of student experience related to character education, specifically once the students have moved beyond the high school environment. Emerging adulthood represents an important time in an individual’s development, and college students are likely to be dealing with issues of separation, identity formation, and intimacy, all of which have important consequences for the future with respect to love, work, and worldview. In addition to the tasks of separation, identity formation, and intimacy, this period of development also presents opportunities related to building values, competencies, attitudes, beliefs, identity, relationships, and self-concept, and individuals must rely on the skills and resources they have developed up to that point. The successful transition to the college environment may rely on students having a clear sense of who they are and making decisions that are consistent with their goals, values, and expectations (Azmitia et al., 2013). Character education represents one opportunity for schools to provide intentional, direct instruction for interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge and skills.
In a general sense, character education efforts aim to provide direct instruction to assist students in developing the knowledge, skills, and perspective to become life-long learners, develop healthy relationships, and contribute to society in meaningful ways (Sojourner, 2012). Character education programs and curriculums exist in many forms, but all are united by the intentional effort to develop character in students. While one school may elect to implement a formal program developed by researchers or found online, another school may design their own approach, unique to their needs and environment. Because research has consistently emphasized quantitative outcomes of character education related to measures of achievement and behavior, little is known regarding the experience of the students who have received these interventions. Additionally, research surrounding character education has not extended into the college environment to investigate the long-term impact that this programming may have. The variety of programs and interventions that exist make it difficult to compare and contrast efforts being made within schools and the impact that these interventions have on students and the school environment. This study aims to address the current gap in the literature by narrowing the focus of the investigation of high school character education to emphasize student experience and the function of high school character education once students enter the college environment.
Chapter 3: Method

Research Design

Qualitative research exists in many forms with various strategies and procedures, but the nature of qualitative research relies on a curiosity and interest in human experience. Rather than focusing on cause and effect, developing predictions, or describing the population through a sample (all common hallmarks of quantitative work), qualitative methods aim to understand individual experience, context, and meaning (Merriam, 2009). Case study research is one method of qualitative inquiry, and is most appropriate for situations focused on “how” or “why” questions that address a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 2014). Further, case study research “explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, of one or more individuals” (Stake, 1995 in Merriam, 2003, p. 15). Case study attends to both the context and the phenomenon, and in a multiple case study each case in of interest because of a shared characteristic or condition (Stake, 1995).

Multiple case study research is also useful in exploring different perspectives on an issue (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) suggested selecting cases to show different perspectives on the central phenomenon (high school character education), and Stake (1995) similarly asserted that one important reason for conducting a multiple case study was to examine “how the program or phenomenon performs in different environments” (p. 23). By selecting cases carefully the researcher may incorporate a variety of contexts and in doing so demonstrate how the central phenomenon appears in those different contexts (Stake, 1995). This diversity of perspective helps to create opportunities for intensive study by balancing a variety of experiences while maintaining a commitment to the central phenomenon being studied (Stake, 1995).

I selected a multiple case study approach for this study to address “how” questions
related to college students’ experience with character education (outside of the researcher’s control), aiming to provide in-depth analysis of each case, as well as a cross-case analysis, which serves to describe the more general phenomenon across all of the cases. I selected my cases in order to provide perspectives from both religiously affiliated and secular high schools as a means for understanding the central phenomenon from a variety of contexts.

Case Selection

The selection of participants for this study was conducted through snowball (also called chain) sampling techniques (a subset of purposeful sampling; Creswell, 2007). In this sampling strategy, the researcher is able to, “identify cases from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). For the purposes of this study, information-rich cases describe students who experienced high school character education and are identified by their high school counselor or administrators as being open, self-aware, and articulate. School counselors are uniquely positioned within the school environment to see the school from an administrative view (allowing them to know whether or not the school makes intentional efforts at character education) while also connecting directly with students to hear about their experiences. School counselors serve as both stakeholders and gatekeepers in the school community and may have the opportunity to stay connected to alums and hear about their transition to college. In this study, I used an existing relationship with a school counselor at one high school to establish connections with additional high schools in the area.

Three high schools were selected from a large Mid-Western city, each having been identified as schools that provide character education for students. Initial inclusion relied on the researcher classifying the school as one with character education. In order to move forward in recruiting a student from that school, the school counselor or administrator confirmed that the
school provides character education that falls within the definition used for this study. Though the initial high schools were selected to provide a balance between private and public schools (2 private schools, 2 public schools), further investigation and contact with school counselors revealed a lack of public schools that fit the inclusion criteria as schools that identified as providing character education. Ultimately, the sample included three private day schools. Sampling strategies were successful in achieving the goal of providing a balance of gender identities (2 male-identified students, 2 female-identified students participated in this study).

The criteria for study inclusion were based on objective and subjective characteristics of students. All of the students were between the ages of 18-22 years, a full-time student at a college or university, living on campus, and enrolled in a minimum of twelve semester credits. The gender of the student was considered in each case selection in order to provide a balance among the cases (both single-sex and co-educational schools were represented). Finally, school counselors were encouraged to recommend racial and ethnic minority students.

**Recruitment**

Prior to gathering any data, I secured approval for this study from The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board. As previously mentioned, high school counselors served as gatekeepers to assist me in identifying and recruiting participants. In collaboration with one local school counselor I identified four schools for initial inclusion from which to recruit potential participants. I also developed a list of back-up schools in the event that one of initial schools fails to meet the criteria, which I ultimately had to use. I conducted a brief interview with each school counselor to gather more information regarding the character education provided through the school. High school counselors were asked to identify students for inclusion based on the inclusion criterion above. To promote credibility in the research, school counselors were
encouraged to identify students who they believe will be rich sources of data, students who would be able to describe their experiences in depth.

**Disclosure of Affiliation**

I wish to make transparent my previous knowledge and connection with each high school represented in this study. I entered into this study with previous knowledge of both Moeller and Cincinnati Country Day School, but no direct or indirect connection or experience with the school or character education programming. I have experience with Saint Ursula Academy including involvement as a member of a Strategic Planning group focused on student life. I also have less formal involvement in the school community and a preexisting friendship with the school counselor who helped connect me with the student I interviewed for this study, as well as with the school counselors at Moeller and Cincinnati Country Day. I have no personal connection to any of the students I interviewed for this study.

**Data Collection**

Prior to data collection, each participant received a consent form to review and sign to indicate their willingness to participate. A case study protocol was used for the data collection process. This protocol provided direction related to the scope of the study, outlining an overview of the study, field procedures, case study questions, and a guide for the case study report (Yin, 2014). Data collection included gathering documents and artifacts from school counselors and administrators (to promote triangulation), but relied most heavily on semi-structured interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each college student, lasting roughly 60-120 minutes. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to engage the participant in a conversational exchange and give the participant the ability to express their experiences and views more fully than if they were to respond to a questionnaire or structured interview.
Storytelling is an opportunity for individuals to express and explore their own process of meaning making and a chance for researchers to be exposed to the inner thoughts and experiences of that individual (Seidman, 1997). I utilized broad, open-ended questions to avoid leading participants and encouraged participants to ask any clarifying questions as needed. For example, one interview question was, “What was character education like at your high school?” I encouraged participants to share any all information that they thought might be relevant and answered questions or clarifications as needed. For example, multiple participants asked for my definition of character education, and I shared the operational definition for this study. Although described here as a unique process, data collection, data analysis, and report writing were interconnected and occurred concurrently through iterative activities including journaling and member-checking.

Data Analysis

In line with the flow of qualitative research, data analysis was inductive and emergent, with initial data analysis beginning at the point of collection. Data analysis primarily relied on interview transcripts, reflexive journaling, and notes. School counselors and administrators were invited to share any artifacts and documents related to the character education experience, although these were not required material for analysis within the case study. Analysis followed the guidelines set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006), which begins with the researcher being aware of patterns of meaning, beginning during data collection and concludes with the final description of those patterns (themes) with respect to both content and meaning. More specifically, I worked to (1) become familiar with the data through organization and review, (2) generate initial codes (open coding), (3) read the transcript to be fully immersed, (4) review each of the themes as codes come together, (5) define and name each theme, and (6) develop the
report in order to provide a rich description of the case (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was conducted for each of the four cases.

Prior to conducting the data analysis techniques outlined above, each of the audio files was transcribed. The coding process occurred over multiple occasions, developing initial codes during early readings, and then refining and potentially revising these codes to reflect a more sophisticated understanding of both the case and its setting. The coding process occurred over the course of an initial reading of the transcript while still in electronic form, followed by hard-copy versions with large right-hand margins for notes, questions, and to highlight and identify key points. The codes that I established during these stages came together to create themes, which ultimately allowed me to develop a rich description of both the case and the context. These themes and descriptions were then used to make comparisons across the four cases and identify broader themes that occur across contexts, as well as to describe those themes that were unique and/or specific to each case.

The product of a thorough multiple case study includes both a detailed description of each case and its setting as well as cross-case analysis. By conducting both direct and categorical interpretation I identified themes based on their salience in a single instance (direct) and repetition across cases (categorical), allowing the reader to see themes that emerged in each case and across all of the cases (Stake, 1995). By establishing patterns and looking for similarity across cases, the researcher can develop naturalistic generalizations, which describe generalizations that readers can learn from the case either for themselves or to apply to a population of cases (Creswell, 2007).

A database consisting of my notes, interview recordings, transcripts, documents/artifacts and analysis was maintained in a secure location. The organization and security of these items
contributed to the overall trustworthiness of this study and helps maintain a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014). This chain of evidence can provide an outside reviewer the opportunity to examine and trace the steps of this study from onset to conclusion, should the need arise.

**Trustworthiness**

Stake (1995) asserts that:

*When knowledge is being constructed, no two observers construct it exactly the same way. Complete confirmation is not possible; views are partly agreed upon, partly not. To the extent to what is not agreed upon is unimportant, what is agreed upon is confirmed.*

*When what is not agreed upon is important, the different views should be reported (p. 37).*

Qualitative research, by nature, is nonstandardized, context sensitive, and relies on subjective experiences both with respect to the participant and the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and therefore must be assessed with standards that consider these aspects of design. Hunt (2011) asserted that conducting good qualitative research relies on transparency, which requires that the researcher outline the steps they have taken to, “ensure quality and trustworthiness” (p. 298). As part of this process, I want to specifically address the issues of social validity, subjectivity/reflexivity, credibility, rigor as they apply to this study. I will address transferability as it relates to qualitative research in a more general sense.

**Social Validity**

Social validity, as presented by Morrow and colleagues (2012), describes the social value of the research as it relates to multicultural competence and social justice. In this study, participants were selected through purposive sampling with intention to give voice to a mixture
of gender, racial, and ethnic identities. In addition to balancing gender across participants, school counselors were encouraged to recommend racial and ethnic minority students. Ultimately, the participants recommended for participation by school counselors and administrators represented a relatively homogenous sample with respect to race and ethnicity. Gender was balanced across participants.

**Subjectivity/Reflexivity**

The process of self-reflection is imperative as part of the recognition of researcher as the main tool for data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2005). By engaging in reflective processes including bracketing and a statement of positionality I, the researcher, aimed to establish and maintain transparency throughout my inquiry. In addition, I kept a journal detailing any and all activates related to the conceptualization and execution of this study including ideas, summaries of conversations and meetings, initial brainstorm for codes and themes, etc. This journal ultimately exists as both a tool for and product of data analysis.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which research findings match reality, or the extent to which the researchers measure what they believe they measure (Merriam, 2009). One strategy to promote credibility within a study is through the use of peer debriefers, which I used in this study as an external check throughout my research process (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, I utilized an established connection with a peer debriefer who is knowledgeable and experienced regarding school counseling and character education.

**Rigor**

Along with the need for adequacy of data, rigor describes the need for adequacy of interpretation (Morrow et al., 2012). This process requires “immersion in the data, a systematic
and well-thought-out analytic strategy, and writing that offers a balance of the researcher’s interpretation and participants’ supporting quotes” (Morrow et al., 2012, p. 111). Member checking was one specific strategy employed through this study to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness. I consulted with participants to review main concepts and ideas that emerged from the interview process.

**Transferability**

The role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry is, in part, to present the findings in such a way that readers may decide the extent to which the findings may be applied to another context or setting (Hunt, 2011). In order for this to happen, readers must be provided with information about the researcher, the context in which the research was conducted (including a description of the participants), and the nature of the interactions between the researcher and the participants (Morrow, 2005). By providing this information, the researcher allows the reader to draw their own conclusions regarding the extent to which the findings of the research may be relevant to their specific context (Morrow, 2005).

As a qualitative researcher, and the individual primarily responsible for data collection and analysis, I do not struggle with the understanding that I enter into this research with biases and preconceptions. Rather, I attempt to acknowledge and make clear those assumptions and beliefs that I maintain, working to describe, rather than explain, the data I collect.
Chapter 4: Results Case-by-Case Analysis

This chapter includes a description of each participant in order to provide a lens through which the reader can understand the participants’ lived experiences. The descriptions come as a result of the initial interviews and inductive and an emergent process of analysis outlined in the previous chapter. Each section includes what I learned about the participants’ broad high school experience, what led them to their current college setting, and an overview of their experiences with high school character education and the transition to college. Next, I present themes that emerged from each individual case, and include quotations from the interview as a means for giving voice to each participant. The main research questions of this study surround how college students identify high school character education, how college students utilize high school character education, and how the college context shapes the utilization of character education. The emergent themes serve to address these questions, and are organized within sections according to the question they most directly address. The four cases in this study are Luke, Lydia, James, and Gail. These pseudonyms were created to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Luke

Luke is a 20-year-old European American male from the Midwest. He is in his sophomore year in college. Luke attended Moeller High School for all four years and currently attends University of Dayton. Luke described Moeller as a private, Catholic, single-sex high school where about 80% of the students are involved in some kind of sport because it is part of the culture of the school. Luke described Moeller as a “stereotypical suburban high school.” Part of the reason Luke initially looked at University of Dayton for college was because both of his parents, two of his grandparents, all of his mother’s siblings, and two of his brothers attended
Dayton, so there was quite a bit of family history and familiarity with the school. The more he looked at Dayton, the more he liked it there. In describing what he liked about the school, Luke identified that it felt comfortable, that everyone there seemed friendly, and the atmosphere felt open. Luke also reported that Dayton’s reputation for having a strong engineering program was attractive.

Luke was recommended for participation in this study by his school counselor, who responded to my email describing the study and outlining the operational definition of character education for the purposes of this research. In our conversation, the school counselor identified Man of Moeller, a tailored character education program that primarily targets freshmen as the central manifestation of character education. The school counselor described the important concepts and values related to this program including faith, service to others, adaptation to change, dedication to studies, education of self, peace, and justice. She also highlighted the role that guidance counselors play in guiding the sessions during freshman year and exploring the characteristics and moral foundation to make cognizant decisions while maintaining perspective. Additional values that were highlighted include academic integrity, forgiveness, compassion, and balance. The school counselor emphasized the role of staff in modeling desired traits and characteristics, and reported that staff modeling is the greatest learning tool for students. She provided a document titled, “Profile of a Graduate of a Marianist Sponsored School” to provide more context for the Man of Moeller program. The document identifies and then expands upon five main characteristics including (1) formation of faith, (2) integral, quality education, (3) family spirit, (4) service, justice, and peace, and (5) adaptation and change. The school counselor provided me with contact information for Luke after reaching out to him directly to see if he would be willing to participate. From that point forward, Luke and I communicated directly.
In describing his experience with high school character education, Luke identified Man of Moeller as a mandatory component of the freshman and sophomore year. As part of this program, students gathered in small groups with their class dean to discuss specific topics. Luke also identified homeroom, participation in sports, adult connections, and the strength of the school community as important aspects of his character education experience. Luke’s transition to college went, “pretty well.” He reported many similarities between his high school and college environments, both in terms of the academic content and the broader school culture. Luke is a member of the Marianist Leadership Scholars at the University of Dayton, a group of students from Marianist high schools who get together each month to participate in service or go on retreats. Overall, Luke felt well prepared for the transition to college, though he was able to articulate some aspects of the transition that were challenging. Both the successes and challenges he faced were reflected in the themes that emerged from his case.

**Emergent Themes**

**Identifying high school character education.** Cultural expectations. I use “cultural” here to indicate the ideas, customs, and behaviors within the school setting. In identifying his experience with high school character education, Luke was quick to mention the school’s culture and the related expectations associated with Man of Moeller, the school-wide program that utilized activities and discussions to promote character education. Luke outlined some of the morals and values associated with this framework including adaptation to change, respect for community, and being able to look out for the people around you as well as your friends and your family. Luke recalled, “…the entire base of the program was to bring up things about what makes a mature, responsible adult, which is why they called it Man of Moeller. It was trying to foster that attitude of becoming a Man of Moeller, so it was integrity and things like that.” Being
a person of religious faith was less of an emphasis, but was part of the expectation as well. Other important concepts included staying true to your values and making sure that you can be a strong person no matter what is happening, creating a sense of community, being present, and being there for the people around you, even when it’s not necessarily someone with whom you are close friends.

Behavioral expectations emerged as part of the larger sense of the cultural expectations that Luke identified in describing his character education experience at Moeller. For example, Luke highlighted an emphasis on service, which aligned with the broader messaging around character education. He described the general student body at Moeller as being “relatively privileged,” and recalls an attitude of, “wanting to give back and go out and use the gifts that you’ve been given with your life to help other people who have not necessarily been given some of those gifts.” There was a community service requirement that all students had to satisfy, and Luke reported that there were a fair number of students who went well above and beyond the requirements.

The atmosphere around discipline also aligned with the larger cultural and behavioral expectations as part of the character education experience at Moeller. Below, Luke describes his perception,

...it was just the atmosphere of the school was set up that I was expected to become a good moral person and that was what the people around me were doing and what the people below me expected from me, and what all of my teachers expected from me, and all the administrators wanted me to do. The atmosphere of the school, especially when it comes to discipline, I think is really
good. It is an expectation of, they expect us to be good people and they expect us to do the right thing and if we don’t, they might catch us.

Faculty members and other adults played an important role in the character education programming at Moeller by modeling cultural expectations. Luke reported that a lot of the teachers at Moeller are good people in general and helped set the atmosphere of being positive. Luke noted a math teacher who was especially impactful and who would take time in class to address anything concerning that was happening within the school. Luke provided the example that if this teacher thought a student was being disrespectful, he would comment on it and explain why he did not find the situation to be appropriate. Sometimes this would prompt a class discussion, and other times it was just a chance for the teacher to express his concern. There were also always teachers on the community service events and sometimes they would get into discussions about why the group was doing their service, how it was helping, and why they all thought it was important. These examples illustrate the ways that Luke saw faculty members contributing to the larger cultural expectations within the school.

Coaches also served as role models within the school community to promote cultural expectations. Character was an important concept to Luke’s rugby coach, who reportedly accepted the coaching position because he thought it would be a good opportunity to work with students and help them mature and grow. The coach was clear in explaining his motivation for taking on the coaching role to his players. Luke reported,

...the reason he became a coach wasn’t necessarily to build a good team. Obviously that was part of it, like the reason he accepted the job, he wasn’t a rugby player or anything, the reason he accepted
the job was because he thought it would be a good opportunity to 
raise and grow students into being good people.

When I asked how he came to know this, Luke responded, “He said it a lot.” Though Luke knew this coach the best, he reported that all of the sports coaches have this same emphasis on creating good people out of the players, and this was seen as more important than actually winning. Luke and his rugby team prayed after every practice and at the end of every game. Each sport team participated in one team mass and one team retreat each season through the pastoral ministry department, a program on campus that coordinated prayer and service activities within the school. During these team events, players and coaches would come together for mass and then gather in a small room to discuss topics like team building and goal setting. These athletic experiences contributed to the overall cultural expectations for character, and coaches played an important role in modeling and communicating these expectations.

**Instruction and practice.** Beyond the broad cultural expectations within the school, Luke identified a variety of means of instruction and practice as part of the character education experience at Moeller. During freshman and sophomore year of high school, students attended Man of Moeller sessions twice a month, a central part of what Luke describes as the character education programming at Moeller. During these sessions, each class was split into sixths and each group meet with their designated academic dean. In these meetings, students would engage in guided discussions around pre-selected topics. Luke described the meetings saying, “you’d meet with them, like the whole freshman class met, like that one-sixth, would meet with their dean and they would talk about different subjects like respecting women and different character things that were all pretty straight forward.” These structured sessions addressed values and
concepts that were central to Man of Moeller and provided opportunities for students to learn and practice these concepts.

Luke described homeroom at Moeller as one example of instruction and practice as part of the character education experience. The way homeroom was set up split each homeroom into mixed-grade groups with five or six seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshmen in the same room with one teacher. Luke described that when younger students were in a group with older kids, they tended to act more like the older students, and the older students tended to act more mature as well. There was an expectation to be a role model in homeroom, and this expectation helped a lot of students by providing an opportunity for upperclassmen to take on that leadership role and practice that maturity. Homerooms also set-up a buddy program that matched seniors with freshmen, and the seniors were responsible for making sure the freshmen were settling into the school community well. This was another opportunity to give the seniors a reason to demonstrate maturity and leadership. Luke described the experience saying, “Throughout your entire career there, there’s homeroom, which doesn’t necessarily teach character explicitly, like telling you how to be a good person, but the way it’s set up… I found in my four years there that really helps with growth…” Man of Moeller sessions and homeroom each represented opportunities for student to engage in instruction and practice related to character development and personal growth.

Beyond the examples of explicit character education within the school day, students at Moeller also attended religious retreats, one as a junior and one as a senior. During senior year most students participated in Kairos, a religious retreat that centered on small group discussion. During the multiple day retreat, students met in a small group and everyone talked about things they would not normally get to talk about, including personal challenges and strengths. Luke
recalled, “the retreat is an opportunity to talk to people you might not otherwise interact with, and learn about their experiences and what they have been through.” Students also have the opportunity to participate in Kairos as a leader, another opportunity for students to practice and strengthen their leadership skills and character. The retreats represent another example of how students were provided with instruction and practice as a means for gaining exposure to and experience with the concepts within the character education framework of the school.

*Sense of community.* Luke described a strong sense of community in identifying his experience with character education. Through homeroom, small group experiences, opportunities to serve as a role model or provide leadership, that strong sense of community emerged as an embedded aspect of the character education programming at Moeller. In speaking specifically about his experience at Kairos he said, “…talking to people and having people talk and having people just talk and say, ‘here are problems that I’ve gone through’ and have them be similar things to things that you’ve gone through or thought about is very reassuring.” This sense of authentic connection came from self-disclosure, prompting connection among students. Luke was able to expand on this idea, moving from connection to the increased acceptance that resulted from that connection saying, “just talking to them about some of their experiences and what they’ve been through in their life really helps you like understand where they come from and maybe be a little less judgmental.” Kindness and familiarity were two subthemes related to this larger theme of connection.

Luke described homeroom as an opportunity for students to develop connections and community with one another through informal interactions as well as more structured relationships, like the buddy program where seniors were matched up with freshmen in their homeroom and were responsible for keeping an eye on their younger buddy. Because Luke
served as vice-captain of the school he would often miss homeroom. He highlighted the opportunities that existed within the homeroom for other students saying, “I think the kids, especially the ones who weren’t too involved in anything else; it was an opportunity for them, to give a reason to be a mature person as opposed to someone who is just hanging out.” Students were able to develop connections, serve as peer role models, and capitalize on opportunities for leadership as part of their homeroom community. Other aspects of community that emerged surrounded the positive peer pressure and prolonged engagement that existed within the homeroom setting, as well as the connection and sense of community that developed through the junior retreat and Kairos. Through homeroom, small group activities, and opportunities for leadership, Luke identified a strong sense of community as an element of his character education experience.

**Utilizing high school character education. Creating new connections.** As Luke transitioned to the college environment, he was faced with the opportunity and challenge of utilizing the lessons and skills he learned during his experience with high school character education and applying them to his new environment. One way that Luke utilized his experience was by developing new connections in the college environment. Specifically, Luke highlighted the habits he developed through his high school experience around openness and connecting with his peers, and the way these lessons influenced his approach to connecting with others in order to build strong, meaningful relationships in the college environment:

*I think the biggest one [value] was probably just that sense of community and being present and able to be there for the people around you. Being able to pay attention to when someone is feeling down or noticing that one kid is always sitting alone in the*
cafeteria. Just being able to look out for the people around you
and being able to tell, even when it’s not necessarily someone that
you’re close friends with, being able to tell when they need
somebody to give them a shout out.

Luke’s statement illustrates the value he places on closeness and connection, pointing back to
high school as a time when her solidified these values. Luke was able to utilize this experience
and value for connection in the college environment in order to make new connections. Socially,
Luke remembers that initially students at Dayton were very outgoing and wanted to meet
everyone and make a whole bunch of friends, but then seemed to stop doing that after a while
and settled down into core groups of friends. Luke described the way he utilized his experience
with character education saying,

*I think it’s the character education and just that expectation of
being a good person, not necessarily has affected any real specific
decisions but it’s kind of shaped who I am and so it affects
everything I do in a way because...the way it has trained me to
look at situations and how I am supposed to act and what makes a
good person and what makes a person that people want to get
along with, um, kind of made me the person that I am, the way that
I interact with people, um, was formed in high school.*

When considering his transition to college, Luke described the biggest take away from
his high school experience was an emphasis on community and his ability to connect with
people. In high school there was an atmosphere of making sure the people around you were okay
and trying to be as helpful towards people as you can, so that has a big influence on him now at
college, and he feels like that is a “large part of morality.” If he is doing something that is constantly upsetting his roommate, Luke realizes that it is not going to end well for anyone. Instead, Luke described that you need to be able to take into account how your actions are going to influence relationships with other people. The ability to look at decisions in that way is very helpful, and is something he got from high school.

*Identity formation.* Identity formation also emerged as a theme in how Luke utilized his character education. Luke was able to leverage the lessons he learned through high school character education as he developed a sense of autonomy and independence. Specifically, concepts including self-monitoring, self-determination, self-esteem, self-confidence, and perspective were all present in Luke’s descriptions of his transition from high school to college. Luke feels like he is more in control of who he is now that he is on his own. One of four children, Luke grew up without much alone time. He reported that at college he does not necessarily spend much time alone, but nobody is concerned with what he is doing in the ways this his parents and siblings did at home. Every decision is his own, and he is doing what he thinks is right, rather than seeking approval from his parents. Luke finds this to be much more enjoyable, though he does not find himself making different decisions than he would if he was being supervised more closely. He reported, “I feel like I’m in more control of who I am, which I feel like is beneficial to have that.” This independence has provided the space and opportunity for Luke to develop a strong sense of identity and autonomy, and the foundation for that process was built in his high school years.

Luke described how the religious retreats helped him build a healthy sense of self-esteem. During Kairos, Luke he was able talk to peers, describe obstacles he has faced in his life, hear about the obstacles his peers have faced, and realize that their experiences have been similar,
which he described as being, “very reassuring.” Having developed that self-esteem in high school, he now feels prepared to address a situation where someone really hates him and he does not necessarily have to take it personally. He is able to consider why they do not like him, and either move on or try to make himself a better person. Kairos created space for open dialogue about shared concerns or issues, which promoted perspective and understanding, and allowed students to connect based on shared experiences. This sense of connection and validation promoted self-esteem, and Luke described the experience as very beneficial to personal growth. Kairos helped him understand where his peers were coming from and become less judgmental towards them.

Luke’s high school character education has been powerful in his everyday interactions with the people around him as he tries to be a good person in everything that he is doing. The high school character education and the expectation of being a good person trained Luke to look at situations and think about how he is going to act, what makes a good person, and makes a person that people want to get along with, and has made him the person that he is today. He attributed the way he interacts with people to his high school experiences. Luke tries to consider how every decision he makes impacts both his personal development and the people around him. As Luke transitioned from high school to college and engaged in the process of identity formation, he worked to negotiate the changing environment while remaining true to himself. In reflecting on this process he said, “One of them [important values and concepts] was adaptation to change. It was like being able to have things around you change but stay true to your true values, where it’s not necessarily what you’re doing that it important but how you are doing it.” This aspect of identity development is rooted in the lessons Luke engaged in as part of his high school character education and demonstrates one way he was able to utilize those lessons.
Transferring academic skills. One important aspect of utilizing character education in the college environment that emerged surrounds the necessity of transferring skills from high school to college. Specifically, transferring academic skills emerged as a theme in Luke’s description of how he utilized his character education experience as he worked to settle into his college academics. In terms of the transition to college, Luke had a pretty good expectation for what the workload would be because both his father and his brother had been engineering majors at Dayton. The academic preparation at Moeller also set him up for success by providing college-level expectations and workload. Luke described the academic transition saying,

*It was a little harder than high school... first semester wasn’t harder because most of my classes senior year were pretty rigorous and most of my classes, like I took Calculus in high school and I took Physics in high school, which were just as hard if not harder than the Calculus and Physics I took that next semester. So the class work style was pretty similar. So just from a time commitment, which is big, it wasn’t that different.*

Luke described college as being different from high school in that you are on your own and you do not necessarily have any oversight.

*I didn’t find it to be that challenging. I enjoy being on my own, but I don’t think I am any different... when you’re with your parents you try to act... there’s that expectation of what you should be doing all the time, whereas when you’re on your own you’re able to do whatever you want.*
Luke enjoys his independence and has been able to find the discipline needed to figure out what he should be doing in terms of homework and other expectations. His freshman year of college was not much harder academically than his senior year of high school, so he generally knew what he needed to be doing and most of his friends had a similar major, which was helpful. By and large, Luke was successful in transferring skills from high school to college in part due to the familiarity of the environment, the consistency of experience and expectation, and the openness that he developed during his high school experience.

**College context and utilization. Increased diversity.** The increased diversity on the college campus emerged as an important aspect of the college environment that shaped Luke’s utilization of character education. In describing some differences between Moeller and Dayton, Luke highlighted that Dayton has a wider range of people and a bigger range of options. In high school the majority of the students were pretty conservative, white, middle-class males. In the college environment there are members of the opposite gender, people with different economic backgrounds, people who think differently about social issues, and with those differences comes a greater need for intentional acceptance. There were some people who are not very accepting at Dayton, and Luke described how the new environment demands more deliberate acceptance saying,

\[
\text{It has to be more intentional to be accepting of the people around you because it’s easy to be accepting of people who are similar to you, or a group of people who are very similar to each other, so if you’re good with one of them you’re good with most of them, so there’s more}\n\]
The increased diversity on campus helped make Luke a well-rounded person because he has to be more intentional about the way that he is acting, and he has to make sure that he is being a good person. Most of his friends expect him to do good things and if he is not being a good person they will call him out on it. He reported feeling confident that he has a pretty good feel of how what he is doing is impacting the people around him, and is good at figuring out if someone is mad at him whether they are justified in their reaction or overreacting. The increase in diversity within his college setting also prompted Luke to enhance and strengthen the accepting attitude that was initially fostered during his high school character education. In describing this process, Luke reflected saying,

*That attitude of just being very welcoming and very accepting of other people...just trying to be very open to the people around you and not judging people based on who they are... I think that intent, that was the base of the character education, was to develop someone who is very open to that, and kind of buys into that attitude.*

Taken together, the increased diversity within the college environment prompted Luke to become more open to others, a process that required a more intentional acceptance and appreciation of differences.

**Case Summary**

Luke identified his experience with character education largely as it related to the Man of Moeller program. His experience with the program included cultural expectations for integrity,
respect for community, and looking out for those around you. Luke identified targeted instruction and practice of these concepts as well as the significant role played by faculty members both in terms of modeling desired characteristics as well as taking an active role in students’ lives and providing them with direct feedback. Luke utilized his experience with character education by creating new connections in the college environment, as well as in his development of autonomy and independence as part of his larger process of identity formation. Luke also utilized his character education as he transferred academic skills to the college environment and learned how to effectively manage his time. The increased diversity at Dayton has shaped the way that Luke utilized his character education by requiring increased tolerance in order to maintain his values related to openness and acceptance.

**Lydia**

Lydia is a 20-year-old European American female from the Midwest. She is in her sophomore year in college. Lydia attended Saint Ursula Academy, which she described as a single-sex, four-year Catholic college preparatory high school that provides a rigorous academic environment. Lydia described Saint Ursula as, “a place where you go to build a great academic future, but also build skills of learning to become part of a family.” Lydia has a lot of passion for her high school, as it is a place that helped her build her confidence, especially with respect to math and science. Lydia was very involved at Saint Ursula, participating in activities like volleyball, softball, leadership, service, and clubs. She also took a lot of honors level classes. Lydia said she “has a lot of passion” for the school, and that it “gave her the confidence to take on a challenge in the math and sciences.” Her college environment, The University of Cincinnati (UC), is a place where Lydia can utilize and further develop that confidence in the engineering program, a male-dominated field of study. Lydia applied to UC because of the co-op program.
within the engineering program, and this has been an impactful aspect of her experience at UC. The co-op program provides both academic preparation and real-world skill development as students alternate semesters in the classroom and in the field.

Lydia was suggested for participation in this study by her school counselor, with whom I initially partnered in brainstorming schools that provided character education as part of their programming. The school counselor described the character education program at Saint Ursula as being focused around the core values of St. Angela Marici, working to empower students to become women of faith, integrity, and courage. Weekly advisory sessions work in conjunction with the Academy Alum program, which offers regularly scheduled structured activities and discussions. The goal is to produce women who are reflective thinkers, servant leaders, nurturers, and prophets. Saint Ursula strives to cultivate women who are committed to building a better world through spiritual, academic, emotional, social, and extra-curricular growth opportunities. The school counselor provided me with contact information for Lydia after reaching out to her directly to see if she would be willing to participate in the study. From that point forward, Lydia and I communicated directly.

Lydia reported that Saint Ursula taught her to be well-rounded and she attributes this to the character building education she received in high school. During her time at Saint Ursula, Lydia participated in a few class retreats, which helped her develop into the person she is today, and taught her to be nice to everyone. She also learned to recognize that she is not the only one who experiences struggle and to appreciate the people around her for all that they are worth, beyond just academics or sports. The single-sex model helped Lydia “figure things out” without the distractions of the opposite gender and helped give a sense of empowerment to women by creating an environment of women together, where students could really see what everyone was
doing well. Lydia also believes that the single-sex model made it easier to foster the kind of environment where everyone can do well. During the transition to college, Lydia utilized her skills of reflection and perseverance in overcoming initial obstacles related to homesickness and the decrease in external structure. Now in her sophomore year, Lydia is still working to translate some of the lessons she learned about character from the high school context into her college environment through trial and error, but overall feels equipped to manage the transition.

Emergent Themes

**Identifying high school character education. Guiding principles.** One main theme Lydia identified as part of the character education program centered on guiding principles set forth through the Academy Alum program, a tailored character education program that Lydia identified as the “blatant character education” component at Saint Ursula. As part of the core mission of the school, Saint Ursula sets out to build women of faith, integrity, and courage. In addition to the principles represented within the mission, students were also supposed to embody four roles: thinker, leader, nurturer, and prophet. Each of these represents a guiding principle that was built into the Academy Alum program, and that Lydia named in identifying her high school character education. The Academy Alum program began freshman year with meetings once a month, where students were introduced to different aspects of character that are emphasized throughout the following years. Lydia remembered,

*Freshman year we met once every month just to talk about them,*

*and then throughout the school years following that the themes would pop up. The first thing I can think of is you go to Saint Ursula and you build women of faith, integrity, and courage...And that’s built into the program of Academy Alum, which in addition*
to that is, being a woman of faith, integrity, and courage, you are also supposed to fill four roles and that’s nurturer, leader, thinker, and prophet...

Additional specific values and concepts that Lydia identified as being covered through the character education programming included building an empowered woman, being the best person you can be, doing things that are right for you but also right for others, being kind to yourself and to others, and going out to affect change in the world. When asked to describe the important values and concepts related to character education Lydia responded, “I’d probably say aside from those points of being faith, integrity, and courage…just being an empowered woman and going out to affect change in the world.” Being an empowered woman means a lot to Lydia, and she described it in practice as a woman excelling in a field that no one said she was supposed to, and someone who is able to hold herself in an esteemed manner and defend herself and her beliefs. This concept of an empowered woman gives Lydia motivation in her male-dominated field of engineering. Other values or concepts include building a moral compass about what is right and what is wrong, and accepting that you are going to be challenged, as well as being a critical thinker, and recognizing that not everyone is 100% connected to their moral compass.

**Activities.** In addition to the guiding principles, Lydia identified a variety of specific activities that served as an important component of her character education experience. During freshman year, students received little booklets as part of the Academy Alum program, which contained examples of leaders or other individuals who exemplified valued characteristics. In their small groups, the students would meet, review the examples, and then discuss the examples or reflect independently. Lydia recalled, “We would read the examples of the characteristics on one side and then write down some examples of how you could or could not be those
characteristics.” Lydia remembered these meetings as being somewhat awkward because most students did not know each other yet. Despite the awkwardness, these activities helped students develop a common language and common experience upon which to build future conversations and activities. In describing the experience Lydia recalled, “We’d have our little booklets and they’d have an example of a leader as someone who, they would think critically, just do the other things that define a woman as a leader, for a woman of faith, integrity, and courage…we would go through the booklet and talk about it.” These conversations and activities around valued characteristics evolved over future years.

As the students matured and progressed, discussions and activities around values and characteristics came about through class discussion rather than structured meetings. Lydia discussed how the difference between being 14 and 17 meant that by the time students were in upper level classes like morality class they had more knowledge and more courage to talk about things better in a debate, compared to freshman year when they relied on the booklet to guide conversation. In describing this maturation process, Lydia explained, “…talking about the same thing developed with maturity, we were actually able to talk about it more.” The first year Academy Alum program provided an introduction to the topics, and as students developed with maturity they were able to talk about those topics in more depth during religion classes as well as other classes, often through debate. Discussions during the Academy Alum program, and more informally in the classroom, helped students learn through personal experience. Lydia described those classroom experiences saying,

I guess where I think mostly it was when classes were debating and we wouldn’t necessarily point out thinker, leader, nurturer, prophet like we would in Religion classes because those just go along
better, but I guess we were learning by doing in those classes, um, how to stand up for your beliefs and also how to listen to other people’s interpretations or beliefs about what they thought.

Lydia described this Academy Alum program as the most definite program that Saint Ursula offers for character education, though there is also a sub-surface program that existed and continued through the years. One of the most important experiences built into this sub-program was Spiritual Journey, a designated week each year when the school was divided up by grade, with freshman completing a bonding experience, sophomores engaging in community service, juniors going on a retreat, and seniors participating in Kairos. Lydia did not identify the bonding experience or community service events as significant aspects of her character education experience, but she did highlight the junior retreat and Kairos as impactful events. Kairos was a three-day retreat led by seven student-leaders and several teachers. Kairos means “God’s time” and is a religious retreat, although Lydia emphasized that it is much more than that. Students have the opportunity to complete their Kairos retreat either junior and senior year which, according to Lydia, is a time when students are at the stage of their lives where they would rather talk about the application of religion rather than simply reading the Bible. Lydia described Kairos as a time when character development occurred at Saint Ursula because students were able to build a sisterhood. During Kairos, students developed their own speeches around a prompt and then presented it to everyone, which Lydia described as an often-emotional experience. Next, the students would go back to their small groups and talk about the speech. Lydia described Kairos as a powerful process because of the individual growth, the sisterhood that was felt among the whole class, and the connection to the larger school. She recalled,
...we went on a few retreats in our days there and a lot of the ways that I’ve learned to be the person I am today is through retreats that taught me to be nice to everyone. Obviously that’s just standard, but also to realize that you’re not the only one to go through and struggle and to really appreciate the people around you for all that they’re worth, not just academics or sports.

The activities during Kairos promoted empathy and a non-judgmental stance by creating space for understanding and connection. Lydia shared how students during their senior year felt the need to appreciate their high school moments more and took the opportunity to meet people they had never talked to before. Leading a diverse groups of people in her senior year at Kairos gave Lydia the chance to expand her social connections and talk to people she had not spoken with before.

The junior retreat was held at a Jesuit retreat center in Milford, Ohio and was structured in the same kind of way as Kairos, although it was not student led. The people at the retreat gave a talk and then the students broke up into small groups to discuss what they heard and then complete activities. Students were also provided with a little booklet from the retreat center and time to journal throughout the retreat. Lydia liked Kairos better than the junior retreat because Kairos was student-led, so the leaders were familiar and promoted greater connection.

In addition to activities including structured discussions, informal class discussions, and retreats, Lydia also identified character education as occurring in less frequent activities including all-school masses, class masses, and guest speakers. All-school and class masses were opportunities for students to come together in larger groups and hear messages from their peers, from school faculty, or from outside guests. Periodically the school would bring in outside
community members who represented a thinker, leader, nurturer, or prophet, and the entire school would gather to hear their message and then split into groups to discuss the speaker and the talk. Diversity speakers came into talk about doing something despite diversity, and Lydia remembered one speaker especially because of her mantra, “He said I couldn’t do it, but I made it to the top.” This message of perseverance has stayed with Lydia and is often present in her life today. Saint Ursula is not diverse with respect to race or socio-economic status, and Lydia highlighted the diversity department as being great for bringing people in to talk who could expand the students’ perspective. Taken together, activities including Academy Alum small group discussions, junior retreat and Kairos, and guest speakers all served an important role in how Lydia identified her experience with high school character education.

**Connection with faculty and peers.** In addition to the activities and retreats, Lydia identified the character education experience through the various connections she developed during her high school experience. These connections included peer, adult, and community connections. During our interview, Lydia described loving all the teachers at Saint Ursula and flooded me with examples. She did connect more with some teachers than others, and felt very connected to her prayer and morality teacher. In a broad sense, teachers always encouraged students to talk about what was right and wrong as well as forming their own ideas and beliefs. Teachers sometimes prompted the questions and debates and other times the debates came about on their own. The literature program taught a lot of skills, specifically the need to defend an opinion with a solid argument and support. Lydia is proud to have been to high school at Saint Ursula, where teachers care about students both academically and personally. Lydia’s favorite math teacher in high school described math as a tool and discussed that although studies show
that girls are less interested in math and science by a certain age, hopefully this is changing as more women are going into the fields. She described the connection with this teacher saying,

...she was just such an example of a woman who knew what she was doing and was very knowledgeable in, she’s a role model, like probably the biggest role model...all my teachers were role models...people to look up to, people to want to aspire to be like, I mean almost every teacher, if I ended up being like them it would be such an honor, having so much passion for what they study...but also having the passion to give that knowledge to the next generation...

Lydia described all of her teachers as individuals she admired. Teachers served as role models and also worked to connect the character education concepts directly to the student experience.

Peer connection, specifically the concept of sisterhood, was another important aspect of connection that Lydia emphasized as part of her character education experience. In describing the power of Kairos, Lydia recalled, “…character development really occurs because you build a sisterhood that at that point is incredible.” This sense of sisterhood and connection began in the awkward moments as freshmen sit with their Academy Alum booklets brainstorming ways to be a prophet in daily life, but in a few years Lydia described the level of connection that developed saying,

...there’s such a powerful sisterhood, that’s probably the biggest feeling that you can ask for a Saint Ursula girl to talk about, I guess most people felt that sisterhood...especially within my class,

I definitely felt connected to the rest of the school, but the class of
2013, they are all very special to me and, um, that’s the sisterhood

I guess.

This sisterhood points to the level of connection that was fostered through the character education experience at Saint Ursula, a connection that Lydia was able to both name and describe as a valued aspect of her experience.

Utilizing high school character education. Identity formation. In describing the ways in which Lydia has utilized her experience with character education, identity formation emerged as a theme centered on confidence, motivation, self-monitoring, reflection, and maturity. Saint Ursula taught Lydia to be a leader by action, and she still tries to carry that with her today. It was very intimidating to be one of only four girls in the classroom her freshman year in the engineering program at college, and Lydia acknowledged that being confident is not easy and it was not present all of the time in the transition. She recalled,

I guess that’s another time in the transition process, just maintaining being a hard worker and really assessing any self-doubts I had about being a woman in the field of engineering and putting them to the side. It was very intimidating being one of four girls in a classroom, it’s still something I’m getting used to but going from four years with only girls in your class to…I think just the empowered woman thing comes in here...

Lydia is still trying to build that confidence in college and, regardless of gender, she feels that everyone needs confidence to be successful.

With respect to motivation, Lydia wants to be an example to her sisters, her sisters’ friends, and everyone who goes to Saint Ursula right now. She wants to show them what is
possible. She aspires to use her gifts to give back, and sees that as being connected to the school’s emphasis on being a leader, thinker, nurturer, and prophet. Lydia is grateful for the opportunities she has been given and recognizes that part of her responsibility now is to share her gifts and give back to the community that fostered her growth. She described this appreciation saying,

*Building a better world happens in so many ways, big and small ways; they’re all impactful. That’s something else we’ve learned, I guess, I feel a great responsibility to give back to my high school and to give back to anyone who has ever helped me to get where I am and where I will be.*

Through her character education experience at Saint Ursula, Lydia learned the skills of self-monitoring and reflection, working to develop her own ideas, communicating them to others, and clarifying values throughout that process. In considering those experiences, Lydia reported, “…in a lot of classes we were told to, you know, just the forming your own ideas and forming your own beliefs.” Teachers would introduce topics or moral dilemmas within the classroom context, and challenge students to debate what they believed to be right and wrong. Lydia remembers, “Saint Ursula really taught you to figure out what you think is right and go by it.” These experiences encouraged values clarification as part of the larger maturation process in developing a sense of personal identity, and this identity development was one theme that emerged in describing how Lydia utilized her character education experience.

**Increased self-awareness.** Lydia also utilized her high school character education by developing skills of self-awareness including reflection and time management. Lydia reported finding that college is much bigger than high school, which means there is a lot more diversity
and students are exposed to many more ideas. For Lydia, responding to the increased diversity has helped reinforce that she is accepting and, through reflection, has also showed her ways that she could be more accepting. She described this increased self-awareness saying,

...the thing about going to this college is it's so...much bigger than my high school, there are so many different people...my eyes were opened...I thought they were pretty open before that, but, you know, my personal, I was just exposed to a lot more, just so many more ideas too, and you know that is just kind of mind-blowing sometimes.

The increased diversity presented one opportunity for Lydia to take the non-judgmental stance she developed in high school and apply it to the college environment. Through reflection and self-awareness, Lydia was able to utilize her character education and translate it to the college environment.

The character education she received in high school impacted her academic achievement at UC to a great degree. Hard work was emphasized throughout her high school experience, and Lydia has seen a direct correlation between hard work and her success. Lydia realizes that she could have done better during her first year, but attributes her “coulda been there” moments to the fact that she was still transitioning. Hard work alone was not enough, though. Lydia also identified reflection as important to success. Lydia described this reflective process saying,

Just being a reflective person and kind of thinking about what you’ve done so far that’s gotten you where you are and what or how you can use or not use what you’ve done so far to get to a new place in the future...just to figure out like, yeah that didn’t work.
Last semester that didn’t work and this semester I’m going to find a new way to make it work.

Looking back at last year helps Lydia by thinking about what caused her stress and what caused her not to get the grades she wanted. Reflection has empowered Lydia to figure out what did not work. It has been helpful to think of times when she has gotten through something hard to keep moving forward. Optimism was also important and it was not always there during the transition to college. However, commitment and persistence paid off for Lydia who recalled, “…at school I was always taught to work hard. I exercised working hard in every way and that has a direct correlation to my success.” Lydia utilized her experience with high school character education through reflection and perseverance in maintaining her commitment to hard work and adapting to her new environment.

Another opportunity for Lydia to utilize her character education surrounded time management. Although she reported developing time management skills in high school, it took time for Lydia to realize that 8 hours of her high school day had already planned out for her and once in college, Lydia found it was stressful to have to give the proper amount of time to everything. Even though the classes are much harder now in her sophomore year, Lydia reported that her first year felt just as hard because she was still getting used to everything. She stated, “it was not easy, you know…because you are in a new environment and everything is different than it was at home.” The transition to college amplified the obstacles Lydia faced in adapting to her new environment. In describing the transition to college, Lydia remembers feeling nervous as she was facing a brand new environment and asking herself, “am I really doing this?” The transition felt scary and college felt so big compared to her high school environment. The transition to class and the lack of structure around time were also difficult. Lydia stated,
...transition to classes was kind of a shell-shock because...it was just so different from high school in the ways that you really have to schedule your own schedule. You don’t go to school from eight to three, then go to sports after school, then do your homework. You have to figure out when you’re doing to do your homework, when you’re going to eat, how you’re going to keep your room clean while also blah, blah, blah.

Lydia does not believe the transition to college is easy for anyone because you are in a new environment and everything is difficult, but building a little community and becoming close with those people was helpful in her transition process. Lydia maintained her focus and reflected on her challenges and successes through with an increased sense of self-awareness. This ability to analyze and reflect upon her thoughts and actions allowed Lydia to grow and develop over the course of her transition.

**Establishing new connections.** Lydia also utilized her experience with high school character education as she established new connections in the college environment. Lydia described how in college you do not have the same friends you have had for 4 years; so missing friends is a really big part of the transition. She recalled, “All of my really good friends, we all went to different colleges and you can’t, the only way you could talk to them was through a phone call and you can’t, that’s just not the same as seeing them every day and so missing friends was a really big part of it.” There is also no alone time at college and you are always stimulated and around people, whereas at home Lydia could close the door and no one would come in because she did not share a room. The other part that was difficult for Lydia was separation from her family, which was even more challenging when difficult moments present
themselves. In the face of separation, Lydia was forced to apply the skills and values she learned in high school in establishing new connections with peers and adults in the college environment.

In terms of establishing new connections, Lydia highlighted how much harder it is to find a sister at UC like she had at the sisterhood in high school. Lydia describes herself as a loyal friend, which is something she developed at Saint Ursula and has tried to carry over to UC. Ultimately, Lydia was able to establishing meaningful connections as part of her transition to the college environment. At the beginning of her program, students were divided into groups kind of like the homeroom experience Lydia had in high school. This learning community was really helpful in her transition, and the students from her learning community are now her friends and roommates. Establishing connections with peers who were going through similar experiences, Lydia stated, “…you have to make friends that are going through similar majors.” The connections she developed through her learning community and also through her dorm served to help Lydia during the broader transition in the college environment. In describing the importance of having peer connection Lydia recalled, “…the process of transitioning was still difficult, so it was nice to have support around.” Engaging with teachers at college is also hard, but Lydia reported that she is ready to do it this semester because she knows that connecting with the teacher will help make her education connect as well.

**College context and utilization. Differences compared to the high school environment.**

Lydia described some differences between high school and college that shaped the way she has utilized her experience with high school character education. These differences included the fact that there are boys at college, the size of the schools, the maturity level of the students, the diversity, class size, living with friends, and the fact that no one is going to make you go do your homework. Student clubs are also different in college, more powerful, require more
participation, and are not as focused on fun. Another difference is that college is a place for adventure, and the party scene was new for Lydia and a place where she sees students get tested. This context has exposed Lydia to new kinds of decisions. For Lydia, seeing the people around her making a wide variety of decisions related to substance use and social life forced her to more carefully consider and decide upon her own path. Lydia has found it difficult to compare party glories to the character values she had been taught for years. Sometimes Lydia has felt as though she was forced to choose between the two worlds, either utilizing the character education from her high school experience or exploring the opportunities presented as part of the social scene in college. Lydia recognizes that not every decision that she has made at college reflects the character education she received in high school, and that the unexpected pressures of a new environment have influenced her decision-making. Reflecting on this, Lydia knows that her teachers did not give her “the toolbox” because they knew she would be able to do it right every time, but she did not realize it was going to be such a challenging process. Lydia has had to relearn how and when to use her character tools of faith, integrity, and courage as she is faced with different pressures and opportunities, and continues to recognize that the process is about growth, not perfection.

**Separation.** Lydia described an additional significant difference at college related to external structure in the college environment. Upon arriving to college, suddenly students became responsible for developing their own schedule and worked to meet the needs of academics and social demands without the support of parents. Lydia recalled this transition saying,

*It’s so different, no one to say, “go do your homework, stop sitting and eating at the kitchen table and go do your homework.”* Just
having that regulatory, having that mom figure but making it part of you, you know, that’s different. It’s a lot of self-motivation, which I definitely feel like I have a lot more of now that I had first semester.

This difference did not present an overwhelming transition for Lydia as she was able to manage the change effectively, but the change forced Lydia to utilize and strengthen skills of self-monitoring and motivation that she developed in high school.

The difference in class size from high school to college has meant that Lydia is more likely to go to the teaching assistant instead of the professor. Living with members of the opposite gender has prompted Lydia to consider what it means to value friendship and treat male peers in the same way that she treats female peers. She has had to adapt her skills of friendship to meet the new set of circumstances as she primarily maintained female friendships throughout her high school years. Lydia works to apply her thinker, leader, nurture, prophet qualities in all friendships, but faces new challenges in that her friendships with male peers sometimes have the potential for romantic relationships as well. This presents a more layered landscape to navigate. Lydia has also had to learn about how to balance the character education she received with other lesson she has learned outside of the character development in school as she faces new and unfamiliar situations in college. This process of values clarification means calling into question multiple perspectives and working to settle on what she believes to be right. This represents a skill that she developed during her high school character education, but she is utilizing it here in a new way.

Given that the college environment represents a physical separation from family and friends, Lydia is still struggling with the challenges that come with managing long-distance
relationships. Lydia has faced obstacles in maintaining those connections and communicating effectively now that she and her friends are now many miles away. She cannot rely on the same strategies for supporting her friends through difficult times by being physically present. Rather, she must work to develop new tactics for maintaining those relationships. She is still translating her morals, which is to say that she is taking what she learned in high school about how to love, how to nurture, and applying that to the distance that now exists between her and her high school friends. She described it as easy to use the character skills she learned in high school when she and her friends are in the same physical environment, but now that distance separates them, she has to learn how to adapt the skills to meet the needs of unfamiliar situations. This process of adapting to the new environmental demands has been challenging, and Lydia reflected on the experience saying,

It’s so hard to translate perfectly a situation where I would have used all my characteristics, my character development, in a situation where we live four hours apart, especially if my only means of communication are phone calls and text messages. That’s probably what I’m still translating my morals, what I learned in high school and how I learned how to love and how I learned how to nurture, um, that’s just one of the things I’m still struggling with, it’s just the distance thing.

The many differences between in demands and supports between Saint Ursula and UC have required Lydia to adapt, and Lydia believed she has been largely successful in managing this transition.
Case Summary

Lydia described her experience with high school character education as consisting of “blatant character education” components related to the Academy Alum program, as well as less overt aspects of the experience like the sisterhood that exists at Saint Ursula as a result of the emphasis on connection and community. Lydia described a variety of activities that targeted character education including a structured curriculum as part of the Academy Alum program, classroom debates and discussions as students matured, Spiritual Journey week when students engaged in junior retreat and Kairos, as well as guest speakers. Lydia utilized all of these experiences in the process of her own identity formation and in establishing new connections in the college environment. Lydia also utilized her experience with character education through reflection and time management, both important skills of metacognition. The differences within the college environment including new social pressures, increased diversity, separation from family and friends, and greater independence all shaped the way Lydia applied her character education experience. In responding to these demands, Lydia has had to integrate these new experiences and information into her decision-making process and balance the lessons and values she learned in high school with the new pressures in college.

James

James is a 20-year-old European American male from the Midwest. He is in his sophomore year in college. James graduated from Cincinnati Country Day School (CCD) after transferring from Loveland High School to CCD for junior and senior year. He currently attends Washington & Lee University. In contrast to his public high school in Loveland, CCD offered a private, independent school environment where academic effort and success were not only accepted, but were actually encouraged. CCD is a co-educational school. The mission statement
of the school emphasizes the academic culture and honor code, and hangs just inside the entrance to the school for all to see. The summer before transferring for his junior year, James met with an English teacher who articulated the importance of academic success at CCD and the idea that students attend CCD to pursue their academic goals. The meeting helped this concept “click” for James, who was seeking this kind of environment. In terms of the make-up of the student body, James described CCD as having about 250 students. He graduated with 57 students in his senior class, and believes the freshman class may have been closer to 70-75 the year he graduated. There was a greater sense of diversity at CCD compared to both his previous public high school and his current college setting (diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity).

My initial contact with CCD was an email to the school counselor, who pointed me to the upper school division head. The upper school division head responded to a follow-up email describing the study and outlining the operational definition of character education for the purpose of this research. We scheduled a phone call, and during our discussion she highlighted the school mission and programs in describing character education at the school. Specifically, she described the school mission as promoting academic excellence, personal integrity, and service to others. The supporting programs she identified included advising, service learning, and peer mentoring.

The upper school division head described advising at CCD as consisting of 30-minute sessions every Friday with a rotating focus on wellness (once a month), teambuilding (one a month), and advisor-directed activities (twice a month). The advisor-directed time is unstructured and frequently used for games or other activities within the advisory group. Advisory groups range in size, but typically are around 8-9 students. There are no strict requirements with respect to the makeup of the group, some are single gender while others are
co-ed, some are single grade and others consistent of students from across grades. Periodically, school assemblies occur during the Friday advisory time, and during these sessions students are given 8-10 questions to consider and reflect upon as part of the assembly. Points of emphasis typically include individual wellness, balance, and decision-making. The upper school division head also highlighted relationships with adults as an important component of the character education programming, citing the individualized training that teachers receive from department chairs and the dean of students. Teachers are expected to provide expectations and feedback for students, and also expected to engage with the kids as part of their role. The service programming at CCD, as described by the upper school division head, includes a full day of service each year, and calendar of events related to service over the course of the year, and a focus on service through involvement of clubs built on student choices and momentum. The upper school division head provided me with contact information for James and Gail after reaching out to them directly to see if they would be willing to participate. From that point forward, I communicated with each of them directly.

James’s older brother attended Washington and Lee University (W&L), though James believes that he would have heard about it regardless of that family connection. A big part of wanting to attend Washington & Lee was the similarity in culture to CCD, specifically the emphasis on academic success and the honor code. Both CCD and W&L have friendly environments that promote individual interactions, like greeting fellow students or faculty in hallways. As a sophomore now at W&L, James continues to see the two environments as having many similarities, describing CCD as, “a miniature version” of W&L. The transition from CCD to W&L was overall a smooth transition for James. He entered W&L as part of the men’s soccer team, which meant that he arrived on campus weeks early and had time to settle into the physical
environmental and develop a social network before the larger student body arrived. James described feeling very prepared academically and has been successful in establishing and maintaining meaningful social connections in the college environment. In reflecting on his success at W&L James said, “my success academically here and just how happy I’ve been here have been a product of my time at CCD.”

**Emergent Themes**

**Identifying high school character education. Behavioral expectations.** James identified a set of behavioral expectations as an important component of the tailored approach to character education he experienced at CCD. The workload was heavy at CCD, and it was expected that students did things the right way and did not take short cuts. James recalled a meeting of the junior class where the academic dean for all of the juniors sat everyone down and discussed the challenging aspects of junior year and expectations for integrity. James described the event saying,

> I remember, and I think it’s happened since, they have a meeting with the entire junior class and the academic dean for all of the juniors sat everyone down...junior year is a notoriously hard year with classes as well as college applications, that kind of thing. I specifically remember he called it a pressure cooker kind of year and just that, you know, remember why you’re here and the school’s mission and don’t take short cuts.

James reported that “character was definitely highlighted and emphasized by faculty” at CCD, and this is one example of those expectations being made clear to students.
Soccer was James’s biggest extracurricular activity and the experience was more focused on team building and character on the field rather than winning or losing. Coaches maintained the same set of behavioral expectations on and off the field. Specifically, coaches emphasized a positive representation of the CCD community and demonstrating consistent hard work. The messaging from faculty was very clear around the importance of hard work and not taking shortcuts in pursuit of academic goals, and this sense of character was central to James’ description of the experience of character education at CCD. James did not experience clubs or homeroom as important aspects of the character education experience.

In terms of specific concepts or values that were emphasized as part of the broader behavioral expectations of the character education programming, James identified honesty, positive social interaction, collaboration, sense of community/family, hard work, and openness to other ideas, cultures, and lifestyle choices. CCD promoted a competitive environment, though also a collaborative one (rather than cutthroat competition). James recalled,

*It was really transformative in that the culture is definitely connected to the academics, but everyone was really competitive, but not in the sense that, of some ivy leagues like pulling pages from books so other people can’t have them. It was really competitive, but collaborative at the same time. That’s what I’d heard about CCD before I transferred there, but I really saw that to be true.*

This behavioral expectation for collaborative competition represents an important balance between personal achievement and valuing community. Rather than emphasizing winning at all costs, the emphasis on character education pointed students toward developing strong habits and
skills and utilizing those skills to help themselves and others. James described this balance saying,

...for me personally that sense of community and the expectation character-wise, that temptation [to cheat] was never really an issue just because...you’re there to learn. That’s exactly why you’re there, not to take short cuts, you know, there were a lot of really intense, hard projects given in a short period of time in the name of preparing for college, but really kind of see-...it’s, myself, I could see it in my students after writing for so long, but not taking short cuts...so character in that sense.

This behavioral expectation for work ethic and integrity was present in the classroom and on the field. James described his experience with soccer stating, “…in the same vein as faculty in the classroom highlighting character, the coaches wanted the same thing on and off the field, the representation of the CCD community at large while we’re playing.” This broad expectation for students within the CCD community was one way that James was able to identify the presence of character education in his high school experience.

**Participation and sense of belonging.** In addition to the cultural expectations at CCD, the high school character education experience also included opportunities for students to participate within the community and develop a sense of belonging. The size of the community contributed to the close-knit feel, as James recalled, “it’s such a small school and everyone knows everybody.” James described the physical environment of the school, specifically the ring of offices surrounding the main area where all the teachers have offices, as being part of the open and friendly atmosphere that attracted him to the school. Teachers were accessible and
encouraged students to meet with them, providing informal opportunities for participation and belonging. The small size of the school also meant that as a student James could not shy away from engaging as part of the community, knowing the course material, or participating in classroom, all of which were aspects of the character education that he identified. This sense of connection and community emerged as a theme in James’s descriptions of his experience with character education at CCD.

James was thrown into many new experiences at CCD that promoted the sense participation and belonging. He reflected on these experiences saying,

*There are a lot of things that just facilitated the opposite of that cut throat attitude, it facilitated working together, whether it was group projects or advisory, where you’d spend 15 minutes with your homeroom, with people you might not hang out with outside of school, sports teams... just, the cliché sense of community where everyone would just push together in a way. At least from my experience, facilitated... just exposing everyone to each other and promoting a sense of collaboration.*

The intentional efforts that were made to bring different people together served to promote participation and a sense of belonging for James within the CCD community.

Students at CCD were required to play sports. James highlighted the sense of inclusion and acceptance that was part of the larger school culture while speaking of students who are trying to decide what sport to play, “they might play baseball even though they haven’t done it before.” This sense of openness and belonging in the athletics was indicative of the larger community. James reported, “I’d say overall it was, as a school it facilitated welcoming, a sense
of family.” Within this larger concept of belonging, James also identified the sense of openness and acceptance as part of the culture at CCD. Discussing values that were emphasized as part of the character education programming, James stated “Kind of along the lines of community, just openness to other ideas, cultures, that kind of thing, lifestyle choices, regardless of background, just working with others regardless of differences.” There was more diversity at CCD than his previous high school, and James described an appreciation for the exposure and increase in varying perspectives within the school environment saying,

you’d see the different cultures, religions, backgrounds, that kind of thing manifests in the interpretations of books, you know, especially in discussions in government class, and it really made you think, um, just that exposure to new ideas was challenging for the good, I’d say.

Faculty members encouraged student participation by having them take varying perspectives on topics in order to think about topics in new and different ways. In thinking back on his experiences, James stated, “I’d say the biggest, most influential messaging on character would be in the classroom.” Teachers provided opportunities for participation and engagement through classroom discussion and activities, and in describing these experiences James stated,

Most of the classes I had, other than Math and Physics, most of the social sciences, the economics, social studies, literature, often times the desks were kind of a “U” shape with the teacher in the middle and you read the material the night before and then you’d discuss and you’d kind of see the different cultures, religions, backgrounds, that kind of thing manifest in the interpretations of
books, you know, especially in discussions in government class,  
and it really made you think, just that exposure to new ideas was  
changing for the good, I’d say.

Teachers were available and willing to connect with students. As James recalled, “Teachers, in my experience, were always readily accessible, before school, free bells, before and after, even during lunch. I had a meeting where the teacher was like, ‘grab lunch and bring it to my office and we can discuss while you eat,’ so it [accessibility] was never really an issue.” Teachers and students alike were part of the culture of participation and belonging, with teachers making strong efforts to be available and engaged in the lives of the students.

James identified his French teacher as playing a significant role in his experience of character education, specifically pointing to her encouragement and accessibility, describing her as a “straight shooter” who was also supportive in guiding students down the right track. James also identified his Physics teacher as playing a role in his character education, and described him as lighthearted and able to get the job done while also having fun while doing it. He remembered,

I spent a lot of time with him [Physics teacher], connecting with him and I think he’s now one of the upper classmen deans. I think he’s the one now giving the speech on the pressure cooker and not giving into the temptation of short cuts, so he was just sort of a good representation of character education at CCD.

James also identified a teacher who served as advisor to many of his friends as playing an important role in his character education. Despite the fact that he was not his actual advisor, James found this teacher to be very accessible and relatable, specifically noting the common
experience of soccer that he and this teacher shared. James has remained in touch with this former teacher and noted his emphasis on the idea “if you’re gonna do things, do them right.”

Finally, James identified the head of school as someone who embodied the idea of doing things the right way. Broadly addressing the role that teachers and other school administrators played in his experience he stated, “Character was definitely highlighted and emphasized by faculty.”

Taken together, James identified a variety of ways that participation and sense of belonging existed as part of the character education programming at CCD.

**Utilizing high school character education. Transferring academic and social skills.**

During the transition from high school to college, James utilized his experience with high school education by transferring the academic and social skills he learned in high school into his new environment. Because James’s brother also attended Washington & Lee, James had visited campus a dozen or so times to visit, and he was familiar with the school and the area. As a result, James felt like he knew what he was getting into, both culturally and academically. This understanding was the main reason he moved to CCD in his junior year, so that he could feel prepared for the transition to the college environment. He developed confidence during his high school experience and stated,

> Just getting out there, putting myself out there in a social setting
>
> and I never had to actually participate in class, let alone a dozen
> peers that are, especially really brilliant that I’d never met, rather
> than just sitting in a classroom. So it was just, I dunno, just
> confidence in one’s character both in the classroom and just
> staying true to yourself in a social setting, I just never had to do
> that before going to CCD.
James reported feeling like the transition to college was significantly easier for him than for his peers both inside and outside of the classroom because of the experience he gained at CCD that allowed him to transfer academic and social skills. James reported,

*It was definitely the preparation at CCD that really made that transition possible. I don’t think I would have survived academically or socially if I hadn’t made that transfer. Just the academic pressure here, while it might be a bit more intense than it was in high school, it wasn’t anything I wasn’t use to. It wasn’t like a jarring transition; it was like, “oh, I was in school in Cincinnati, now I’m in school in Virginia.” It wasn’t anything bad.*

The biggest task that James identified in the transition related to the issue of time management and reconciling his social life with his academic work. In addressing this difference, James utilized his high school experience and felt more prepared than others around him at college in transferring his academic and social skills. CCD was a miniature version of Washing & Lee in the sense that both schools provide intense academics, but everything was just a step up at Washington & Lee, yet not completely overwhelming. Early on it was difficult to balance soccer, schoolwork, and socializing. During high school, James quickly learned that waiting until the last minute was not a good idea for schoolwork. He reported that the time management aspect of the transition to college was not too bad. James articulated this idea saying,

*So early on…time management wasn’t great on my end, but I was usually okay about getting work done, then soccer practice, then maybe more work, then socializing. CCD was good in that*
because, like I said, the first night I had three and a half hours of
homework and I learned pretty quickly that I couldn’t wait until
the last minute. It wasn’t really too bad as far as time management
went, I could still probably do better though.

The transition to college prompted James to realize some of the things that he had taken
for granted in high school, including laundry and grocery shopping. The adjustment was not
overwhelming, but it took some getting used to, “The biggest difference I’d say between life here
and at home, I mean the social aspect is easy, I’m free, I don’t have parents, I don’t have to be
home at a certain time, you know, that kind of thing.” Overall, James was successful in utilizing
high experience with high school character education by transferring both academic and social
skills from CCD to W&L.

Establishing meaningful connections. Another way that James utilized his high school
character education experience was in establishing meaningful relationships in the college
environment. James initially started out college as part of the soccer team, and although he was
unable to continue due to injury, coming onto campus early to participate in preseason training
gave him a chance to both get comfortable with the physical environment and also gave him the
chance to develop a social network before the whole student body arrived. He recalled the
experience saying,

I’d say the other big thing is I’m just much more confident, not
only with my peers but also professors, teachers, just adults in
general. It started for me, I started soccer the summer before CCD
and I was meeting friends’ parents and I’d never had to do that,
actually have quote-un-quote adult conversations, so it just made it
... easier to use office hours here [in college] ... it just makes talking to a professor about, whether it’s life or school, that much easier and I’m not nervous of super anxious to go just because it’s an adult. I know I got over that when I went to CCD.

The older players helped the younger players learn where to go, what professors to look for, and provided other helpful insights as part of establishing meaningful connections.

In terms of balancing the social life with academics, James reported a general fear of missing out on events or opportunities to get to know new people. Early in his freshman year this feeling was present because that was the time period when people seemed to be more open to establishing friendships and getting to know one another. In his sophomore year of college, James is now living with his fraternity and has not really dealt with homesickness, though it was present at first during his transition. Though he had experience with sleep away soccer camp, he had never been that far from home for such an extended period of time before and at first there was not really anyone to connect with. Once soccer really started up, however, the activity kept him busy. He spoke to his parents on a weekly basis, but did not feel like he was missing home much because he was too busy to really think about it. The meaningful connections that he established on campus helped promote the sense of connection and belonging that existed in his high school environment.

James described his experience at CCD as “transformative” both in terms of character as it relates to academic expectations as well as character outside in the social setting. Transferring to CCD presented him with the new task of participating actively in class, introducing himself to his peers’ parents, and navigating the new expectations around dress code and other behavioral norms, all while maintaining a sense of self in the process. These new tasks required confidence.
As James recalled, “…when I transferred, it was just, you were forced to be confident in meeting kids.” Because he was required to participate both academically and socially, James felt positive pressure to raise his hand in class or go meet someone new, and he developed academic and social confidence as a result of those experiences and the meaningful connections that emerged.

**College context and utilization. Similarity of environment compared to high school.**
The similarity of the college environment compared to high school emerged as an important theme that shaped James’ utilization of character education in the college setting. The academic pressure in college was greater than he experienced in high school, but not unfamiliar, so the transition academically was not overwhelming. James indicated that the preparation he engaged in at CCD made the smooth transition to college possible, and reported feeling like he would not have survived academically or socially if he had not made the transfer. The similarity of the college environment to James’ high school environment made it simple to utilize high experiences with high character education in much the same way that he did in high school. The honor code at Washington & Lee was a familiar experience to high school, and is part of the culture of the school at W&L like it was in high school at CCD. Students at W&L respect the principles of honesty and integrity in the classroom. These concepts carried over from CCD where James learned how to manage his workload and not take short cuts. Another aspect of character education that carried over easily based on similarity was the sense of confidence that James developed at CCD both academically and socially, especially the comfort he developed in speaking with adults, including teachers/professors. Because W&L was such a similar environment, James has been able to directly apply the skills and strategies that he learned at CCD and develop relationships with professors in his new environment.
In considering the extent to which high school character education impacted the college transition, James reported that the reason why he has done well at Washington & Lee was solely because of his time at CCD, largely related to the writing and communication skills he gained there, as well as the work ethic he developed. He also attributed the ease of his transition socially to what he took away from CCD, and the experience he had transferring from Loveland into CCD. That experience forced him to gain confidence, and that confidence translated into happiness and comfort during the transition to college. James stated, “Both CCD’s culture and academics were pretty intense, as it is here, so I was already used to certain things.” In terms of overall well-being and peer interactions, James cited the relationships he developed at CCD as being supportive and helpful when he was struggling a bit in his first year, and noted how the openness of that close-knit community was helpful because he got used to working really hard under stressful conditions, and was able to use that experience and perspective to keep pushing forward in the college environment. This sense of perseverance was helpful in terms of his overall well-being in the transition to college.

Because the environments are so similar, it was difficult for him to think of how the transition changed how he perceived work, social interaction, integrity, or other ideas. James said, “The cultures of CCD and W&L line up pretty well and I joke that this is just a bigger version of CCD.” Overall, James feels strongly that his success academically and his overall happiness at college have been a product of his time at CCD. He sees the transition from Loveland to CCD as playing a significant role because it helped him appreciate the opportunity at CCD as he came from a larger school where academic honesty was not as highly regarded. These values and experiences also led him to Washington & Lee, knowing that he wanted to find a college environment that also matched those values. Taken together, the similarity of
environment shaped James’ utilization of character education in that it required very little adjustment and allowed James to maintain his approach to academic and social success.

**New social climate.** One difference that James’ new environment presented surrounded the new social climate within the college context, and this shaped the way he utilized his character education experience. James discussed how Washington & Lee is much more active socially than CCD saying, “There’s always something going on, there’s always people to meet.” Although there were groups of friends with similar interests at CCD, there were not necessarily cliques, but at Washington & Lee there is much more separation among groups of friends, largely driven by the high percentage of involvement in Greek life. James joined a fraternity and reported that most people are happy in the fraternity and sorority they choose. While there is no apparent animosity between different groups, there does tend to be more separation as people spend the majority of their time with their fraternity or sorority. Overall, James described Washington & Lee as more socially active, but also more socially separated than CCD, and as a result he has found himself with a smaller circle of close friends.

Another difference in the social climate is that in high school the library tended to be a place where people would spend time during free bells and hang out, while at college it is a place where people hunker down and go to be productive with work. In high school, students spent about seven hours a day on campus, but in college you spend all of your time around the same people. In some ways this motivates James to work more diligently or more often as he sees students around him grinding away on work and encourages him to embrace the traits he learned at CCD around work ethic and honesty. The physical spaces have influenced James’ behavior based on how his peers are utilizing that space.
Case Summary

James described his experience with high school character education in terms of behavioral expectations related to hard work and not taking short cuts. These values translated across academic and athletic settings, and school faculty played an important role in modeling and enforcing these expectations. James also identified his experience with high school character through the emphasis on participation and sense of belonging that existed within the high school environment, specifically the availability of teachers and their willingness to connect with students on a personal level. James was able to transfer the academic and social skills he learned as part of his character education experience quite easily as his college environment was largely similar to CCD. James successfully established meaningful relationships on the college campus as a result of his involvement in the school soccer team as well as by tapping into the confidence he developed at CCD in meeting new people and creating new connections. The similarity of the college environment shaped James’ use of character education, as he was generally able to apply the same attitudes and behaviors in his new environment to find success. The social climate at W&L represented the only area where James could identify differences between his high school and college environments, and James adjusted to the increased activity and separation among social groups as a result of the Greek life system by joining one of the fraternities. He has also found himself to work more diligently and more often as a result of the work ethic he sees demonstrated on the college campus.

Gail

Gail is a 19-year-old European American female from the Midwest. She is in her sophomore year in college. Gail attended Cincinnati Country Day School (CCD) from pre-K through senior year of high school, graduating with 54 of her peers. She describes CCD as small
and AP-centric, a place that is driven to get students to college. As noted previously, CCD is a private, independent, co-educational school. Gail reported there were many new faces filtering in and out of CCD as it was common for “company brats,” or children of employees of companies like General Electric to spend some time at CCD while they lived in Cincinnati before moving on to a new city. Gail described the student body at CCD as a relatively privileged group that did not represent a great deal of diversity with respect to race or socioeconomic status. Now in her sophomore year now at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, Gail experiences much more diversity in her daily life. Emory was an attractive college setting based on size and the friendly and welcoming people that Gail met on her numerous trips to visit campus. She wanted to attend a school that had name recognition but was not an Ivy, and Gail was not interested in attending college in the northeast due to the cold and the perception that everyone from her school went north. Gail liked the warmer climate in Atlanta as well as the convenience of having a major airport nearby. This accessibility has proven helpful “time and time again” when her parents come to visit.

As mentioned in the previous section, Gail was suggested for participation in this study by the upper school division head at CCD. The upper school division head described the school mission as promoting academic excellence, personal integrity, and service to others. She also highlighted advising, service learning, and peer mentoring as important aspects of the character education programming at CCD and emphasized the role of teachers as models in the school environment. (Please refer back to the previous section for more details regarding her description of character education at CCD.)

Gail reported that the tailored character education she received as part of her high school experience “was pretty subtle, but it definitely impacted me a lot.” Specifically, Gail identified
accountability, manners, kindness, responsibility, effective communication skills, and perseverance as important values and concepts that were included in the character education experience. These lessons came primarily through experiences in the classroom and sports, though also through guest speakers and service activities. In reflecting more specifically on her transition to the college environment Gail reported, “the character development, that giving me those tools, they’re mainly for academics, I think, personally, but I mean respecting others and things like that helped, but not in a huge way.” Gail faced some obstacles during her transition to the college environment. Academically she felt very well prepared, but socially she did not connect right away. As she was initially settling in to the college environment, Gail approached life at Emory in much the same way that she approached life at CCD, which meant elevating academics above all else. Her first semester grades were excellent, but Gail felt “unfulfilled on campus” and made intentional efforts to establish more connections in the second semester of her freshman year. As a sophomore, Gail is much more satisfied with the balance in her life and generally believes that, “no one is really prepared for college because it’s a time when people are trying to figure themselves out and therefore do stupid things.”

Emergent Themes

Identifying high school character education. Behavioral expectations and feedback. Gail described the character education at CCD as subtle and impactful saying, “It wasn’t like once a week let’s go for manners; it was just like a constant presence and still it was engendered into your being until it was so entrenched in you that you didn’t really even have to think about it.” The school stressed behavioral expectations including accountability, especially in terms of taking responsibility for seeking out teachers and meeting with them outside of class time as well as developing good manners. Students were expected to keep their belongings in their possession
rather than leaving things around school, and this is a behavior that Gail described as having now become a habit for her. Students were also taught to argue intelligently, forming their own opinions.

Organization and how to communicate effectively with adults were also important areas of preparation for students at CCD. Students were expected to defend their opinions and ideas, while also being open to the ideas of others. The dress code at CCD was intense and taught students how to dress properly. All of these lessons and points of emphasis were embedded in the school culture rather than being instructed directly, though there were direct consequences when students missed the mark on things like manners, dress code, or keeping track of their belongings. CCD had an honor council with student members who served as judge and jury for students who stepped outside of the expectations and boundaries. Plagiarism was dealt with very seriously at CCD and Gail recalled how an issue around plagiarism was dealt with saying, “If you plagiarized you were going straight to honor [council], it wasn’t like, ‘oh you get another chance,’ it was like, ‘you’re going to talk to this huge organization and plead your case.’” The honor council helped reinforce the cultural expectations for behavior on campus.

**Participation in community.** In identifying aspects of her character education experience, participation in community emerged as an important theme. Gail had the same homeroom for all four years of high school, and having the same advisor and the same students in the homeroom throughout the years provided continuity in her experience. She recalled,

> My personal advisor in daily morning wouldn’t get that involved,

> like she would say what is going on, she wouldn’t force

> conversation or force camaraderie, she was just there and if

> someone put their foot up on the table or something in her room
she would be like, “put it down.” She was just there to watch over us, I guess.

In describing CCD, Gail highlighted the way CCD promoted participation in community based on shared experience saying, “Country Day really fosters life-long friendships because you’re under a ton of pressure all the time, and everyone is going through it.” The small environment and consistency within that environment both contributed to an overall sense of participation in community that emerged as Gail described her experience with character education.

Teachers promoted participation through class discussion and activities. Gail reported that although teachers at CCD may have had their own opinions or biases, their role was to present every perspective for students to consider, allowing students to select the one that was the right fit for them, individually. Gail stated, “Forming your own opinions is super important. Every teacher had their own biases, but they saw the importance of laying every perspective on the table and you got to hand pick which one was right for you.” Students were not expected to agree with the teacher, but rather were expected to actively engage in the process, argue their point, and develop analytical thinking skills and a clear writing style. These skills further developed the ability to participate and engage in the classroom and larger school community.

Teachers were involved and supportive, and served as an important part of the CCD community. Gail described how teachers would stop students in the hall to acknowledge an award or a performance in a sporting event, and how, overall, teachers played an active role in everyone’s life regardless of whether or not they taught that student directly. Teachers were very accessible and would stay after school for sporting events and club activities, and talk openly to students about good performances and also when they thought there was an issue with a bad attitude or some other concern. She recalled,
Teachers that didn’t have you in class or know you very well still monitored everyone, I guess that’s kind of significant instead of having a hands-off, I don’t know you so I can’t help you, like if they saw you, I don’t know if they saw you do something great, like they’d stop you in the hall like, “way to go, good job on that award...on that sports game...” whatever.

Gail described the level of engagement saying that CCD was, “just like such a small community that everyone holds you accountable to be the person that they want you to be, that they hope you are still.”

In terms of specific teachers, Gail highlighted a math teacher who held her accountable for continuing her education in math as she navigated in the shadow of her sister’s success. This teacher encouraged her to avoid becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy and worked with her consistently to improve. Though their work together largely centered on academics, Gail appreciated the kindness and support this teacher provided. Gail also mentioned her Spanish teachers, all of whom were amazing people and helped her come into her own with the language by challenging her and being accessible for extra help. Gail described, “every single one of them was so willing to talk outside of class in Spanish, so, to the point now where I’m fluent and I’ve had jobs where, last summer I had a, um, a job where I was translating,” Like her math teacher, Gail’s description of her connections with her Spanish teacher center on academics, but also conveyed a sense of care and commitment beyond the hours of the academic day. Her tennis coach was also a significant influence and since she was not the warmest person, Gail remembers working that much harder to get her approval. Gail reported that many teachers, though supportive, did not provide a lot of outright praise and required hard work to earn praise. This
made her constantly strive for the best grade, the best everything. Gail also highlighted an English teacher who had graduated from CCD and had high expectations for vocabulary and communication, but was also accessible. He demonstrated warmth and caring, and helped students feel comfortable in the classroom environment while also challenging them to take an active role. He also served as the dean and was both somewhat feared and also greatly respected as a role model. Gail’s described her math teacher, Spanish teachers, tennis coach, and English teacher as important adults in preparing her for college, largely in an academic sense. Although Gail did not describe deep personal connections with any of these individuals, she did identify them as meaningful in their accessibility and demonstrated care.

The school also brought in speakers who would engage students by expanding their perspective. Topics often included issue of culture or privilege, and sometimes included an unfamiliar issue that the students might not have a lot of experience dealing with like drug addiction or homelessness. The junior and senior classes also had speakers come in and share their experiences and perspectives around college, internships, or other issues that were coming up in the students’ lives with an emphasis on having students consider their own end goals, what they want to do with their life, what they need to do to get there, and what they need to learn to get there. Gail stated, “Bringing in outside speakers in order to enrich us academically, but also give us some perspective on the space that we occupy as privileged young adults I think was pretty important.” The outside speakers served to further engage students and encourage meaningful participation as part of the school community.

Student clubs and organizations were also an opportunity to students to develop important skills, as club advisors typically played a very small role and allowed students to have the bulk of the responsibility. There were also awards given to recognize students on academic
achievement and character. The character awards had a few different points of focus, though Gail indicated that each recipient was also someone who was recognized as an academic. There was an award that always went to someone funny like a class jokester, and there was also always a Miss and Mister Country Day to honor students who exemplified the characteristics that were important to Country Day like manners, academics, and athletics. There was also an award that was given for athletics, but under the character award umbrella. Considered more broadly, the awards celebrated and reinforced positive participation within the school community.

Team sports were another opportunity for students to grow in terms of character, specifically in terms of being part of a team and learning how to community. As a member of the tennis team, Gail described how the entire team was expected to stay until the end of each match to support their teammates, and how this was unique to CCD and not common practice among peer schools. The emphasis in sports was on camaraderie, sportsmanship, and personal accountability, and these lessons were expectations in the academic setting as well. Some additional values and concepts that Gail identified as being central to the character education at CCD include honesty, being a team player, giving back to the community, being a leader, responsibility, respect, being morally north and not doing things to harm other people. The expectations were high for engaging effectively in the school community.

Utilizing high school character education. Identity formation. Gail utilized her experience with high school character education in the process of forming her identity through high school and into college. In preparing for the transition to college, Gail was excited to assert some independence. She stated, “The idea of striking out on my own was really important to me.” The location of Emory in Atlanta, Georgia served to balance her desire for autonomy and accessibility. Her father has a college friend in the area, and both of her parents could easily fly
to visit if needed. The independence helped Gail develop her sense of identity and autonomy. She reflected on the transition and the growth saying,

\[
I \text{ mean in high school like large scale I felt like I was under the influence of teachers and my parents, and everything was very college-centric, like, “you’re gonna go to college and that’s what matters right now.” I really didn’t feel like I had to choose anything yet...and then beyond that I didn’t really establish a sense of self, really, until I had time to think about it...like in high school it didn’t come up that much, I guess, um, “What do you believe?” Like people would ask that in class, but more on an academic level instead of a personal level...but in college everyone cares and everyone has their opinion and, I don’t know, I guess that’s what kind of made me start to figure out what I wanted.}
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Academics were the main emphasis for Gail during her experience at CCD, and she did not devote a great deal of time to answering some of the larger questions around identity during those years. Although Gail had not engaged in much soul searching or identity formation during her high school experience, she was able to utilize skills that she learned in that time to develop autonomy and a stronger sense of identity in the college context.

Gail described CCD as a largely homogeneous place, where students shared similar backgrounds and experiences. While this was likely helpful in establishing connection and creating a sense of belonging, the level of similarity and familiarity combined with the high expectation for acceptance and respect manifested meant that there was minimal conflict and need for exploration related to those differences. In discussing her transition to college, Gail
described the racial and religious tensions that existed in the college community and how those experiences impacted her perspective. As diversity and intolerance increased, so did conflict. Gail described an event when the Islamic Student Association at Emory put up an apartheid wall and, “within twelve hours it had been torn down and defecated on.” She compared this to her experience at CCD saying,

such strong opinions, where people would be respectful to each other at Country Day and say, ‘okay you believe this and I think this, it’s not gonna effect us, or it will effect us and we will talk about it…” to be on a campus so volatile around social, political, economic issues…that was a huge difference...

Gail was also faced with the reality of peers who were paying their own way through college. Confronting these different backgrounds and experiences provided an opportunity for Gail to utilize her experience with character education and consider more closely aspects of her own identity and solidifying who she was and those values that were important in her life. She stated, “The new environment just kind of gave me a challenge to just remember what I learned, how I’ve been successful in the past because of the things I learned…it’s hard when you see intolerance to accept that.” These experiences provided space for Gail to consider her own identity and develop her level of autonomy and sense of self.

Managing transition. In addition to developing a stronger sense of personal identity, Gail utilized her character education as she managed the transition to the college environment, both in terms of utilizing her strengths and the need to develop new skills in the face of a challenge. It was a big adjustment for Gail to live with her peers and share a room. It was also new to interact with different kinds of people coming from backgrounds that Gail was not really exposed to at
CCD. During her first semester when Gail was very focused on academics, she sacrificed some social opportunities. As a result she did very well academically, but felt unsatisfied on campus. In her second semester Gail joined a sorority to strike a better balance of academics and social life. She recalled,

_I was so focused on academics just because I think it had been so instilled in me that that’s what’s important, but grades aren’t everything, which I came to believe in high school, that grades were so important...So first semester...I did so well academically and I felt so good about it, but I felt unfulfilled on campus._

The skills that had served Gail well in high school, namely prioritizing academic success above other endeavors, failed to provide an acceptable level of fulfillment in college and Gail worked to navigate a new path for happiness and success. During the break between first and second semester Gail went back to visit CCD, but could not bring herself to actually go into the school. Reflecting back, Gail described how she, in some ways, had felt like she was just in thirteenth grade and even though the transition to college had not been unexpected; when she went back to CCD she did not feel very removed. She did not feel a great sense of personal growth at that point in time. She recalled feeling, “Like I could go back to school right and things would be different because of the people, but the same because I haven’t done that much growth as a person.” In that second semester Gail joined a sorority, joined clubs, and started branching out to meet new people beyond her hall mates. She described her attempts to make the school feel smaller and smaller during the first semester, but in the second semester she let it get a little bigger. She stated,
And because of my high school experience, I have somehow made my college experience so much smaller, like joining a sorority, joining very small clubs, joining sorority and fraternity review life boards, like that kind of stuff that is small in and of itself to make the campus smaller... I could have branched out more because I am an extrovert, but um, just like I was constantly trying to make it smaller, smaller, smaller, and then second semester I let it get bigger.

Facing this challenge illustrates both struggle and skill as Gail identified the flaws in her original approach to the transition, and demonstrated confidence and perseverance in developing a new method for engaging effectively.

Gail sees her high school character education as having been a little bit impactful on her transition to college, as the main tools that she developed at CCD were academic tools and they did not really stress the issues around the transition to college. Some of the concepts, like respecting others, helped in the transition, but not in a huge way. She stated,

*The transitional stuff isn’t as stressed at my high school and being with those people for so long and then having to transition, it was more of a me thing than a school thing...I needed to do most of the work and the character development, that giving me those tools, they’re mainly for academics I think, personally, but I mean respecting others and things like that helped, but not in a huge way I don’t think.*
Gail faced unexpected obstacles in her transition to college. Though she was well prepared academically, her approach to developing connections with those around her (both teachers and peers) required adjustments in the new environment. During her high school experience, Gail had not been faced with the need to develop a strong sense of identity, and instead did much of this work during her transition to college. In one sense, Gail’s character education provided her with some of the tools necessary for these tasks including confidence and competence, but in other ways she lacked the kind of practical experience that would have made the transition smoother. Each of these aspects describes the skills and struggles Gail demonstrated in utilizing her character education as she managed the transition to college.

*Connecting with others.* Connecting with peers and professors emerged as another important way that Gail utilized her high school character education. Gail reported being homesick during the first semester of college, partly as a result of her pattern of just studying and going to classes and feeling like she was still in high school, just without the presence of her parents. Family time had been a big point of emphasis in high school, so the separation was difficult, as she did not have a strong connection with anyone at school. The increased freedom and lack of direction about when to do homework, when to take breaks, etc. was difficult to manage. Initially the homesickness was also a barrier because Gail had not yet found other people who were homesick and this felt even more isolating. Gail combated the homesickness by utilizing skills she learned in high school including making a schedule for herself, trying to save homework for the weeknights (rather than spending the weekend getting ahead), and forcing herself to go knock on doors and socialize with her peers. Getting outside of her room was the hardest step, but she was able to tap into her extroversion and develop good relationships by the end of that first semester. She recalled,
So just channeling the extrovert that I knew that I was and going and knocking on doors and saying like, “do you want to get a meal...doesn’t this sound like fun...” like, I don’t know, normal, just getting outside of the room was probably the hardest step.

The initial connections and friendships within Gail’s dorm have trickled away as her connections within her sorority have strengthened. The emphasis on participation in community that was present in her high school experience remained influential as she transition to college and recognized that the system of support required intentional efforts on her end. College professors were much less likely to prompt class participation or engagement, and were equally less likely to initiate an individual connection with students. Gail came to recognize that if these relationships were important to her, she would need to make the effort to establish them. Through this process Gail has learned more about who she is as an individual and how to actively establish meaningful connections in a new environment.

The transition to college challenged her to hear opinions that were very different from her own and really look more closely at her own personal beliefs, where they came from, and how her beliefs and preferences might be different now in a new context. Addressing this difference provided a complex and layered situation for Gail as she was forced to use her experiences in high school and extend them into the new environment. Gail noted that in the college environment she finally had the time to think about what she liked and did not like and was not without someone watching over her shoulder, and that this gave her the opportunity to consider more perspectives. In high school teachers were highly accessible and motivated to develop relationships with students, and the close-knit community meant that peer interactions were also easily facilitated. In college, however, Gail described challenges in,
having to deal with professors who didn’t actually want to get to know you...they’re there to teach their classes and then go home at the end of the day. That was surprising to me. And then you meet people who are 100% disrespectful, but they are academic. That was a huge shock to my system, that they could be so abrasive, but be so smart, it just didn’t compute.

Gail confronted these initial obstacles and did establish solid connections with her teachers by utilizing the skills she learned in high school. She stated, “I think I formed very meaningful relationships with my first semester professors because I wasn’t afraid to go to them, whether I had a good grade or bad grade, that definitely helped.” Gail valued connection with her teachers and utilized her high school experience to establish meaningful relationships with her teachers in the college context.

Gail was matched with a random roommate for her freshman year, which posed a challenge as they had difficulty establishing a connection or friendship. Looking back on this experience, Gail is glad that she took the opportunity to be matched with someone who presented many differences from her including race, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Gail’s roommate was also smart and was at school on scholarship and she was under a great deal of pressure to achieve academically. Though they were both academically motivated, Gail did not experience the same pressure for performance and felt confident in her ability to earn high grades as long as she completed her work. The academic pressure and stress did get to her roommate and this resulted in frequent crying and an emotional breakdown. Gail recalled, “She was under this immense amount of pressure. She was science-minded, and when she finally had to take an English course she was so lost that I tried to help her, but she had this very intense, I
don’t know, I found her crying at the foot of her bed a lot.” The two ended up falling into a rhythm where they saw one another infrequently and it was clear that they would not be rooming together the following year. This experience was somewhat disappointing as Gail had hoped to find her best friend as her roommate, but overall it was not too difficult to manage. She summarized the experience saying,

*It became very clear that we were not going to live together again and that was fine, and then second semester I wasn’t in the room very much anymore so it really didn’t matter. We didn’t spend time together outside of our room. She would come in after I was asleep, I would wake up before her. It became kind of like, I knew we were just sharing a room. I went to college hoping I would find my best friend as my roommate, so like disappointing, but I could handle it, it was fine.*

Gail was forced to move away from her original hope that her college roommate would become her best friend. Instead, Gail translated her values from the focus on developing close relationships with everyone around her into an emphasis on treating others with kindness and respect, while maintaining self-care and establishing a sense for what marks a satisfying connection.

Gail was able to form meaningful relationships with college professors as a result of the confidence she had in her ability to speak with adults in a polite and effective way, a skill she developed in high school. She also points to her manners and willingness to afford everyone respect as being an important aspect of her transition and something that helped her by being accepting of others. She came to college with knowledge about different cultures and an ability
to understand where people were coming from, and her ability to speak to others regardless of education levels also helped. Gail also identified her willingness and ability to speak up when she sees someone acting in a way that is not fair to others or is disrespectful. She stands up for what she believes in because of her character education and affords everyone respect. She also engages in volunteer work and strives to get involved in things outside of herself in order to gain perspective and continuing growing and giving back.

Coming out of a school that was highly competitive, Gail reported that it took some time to establish her new social circle and found it more difficult to fit in to the college environment. Gail recounted this aspect of adversity saying, “Because I had been at a school that’s super competitive I think it took me a while to find my people, so socially I found it harder to fit in [at college].” She was known as an extravert in high school, but it was difficult to settle into a new social environment after having had the same friends for so long. Academically, the transition was very smooth, and while it is harder this year as she is taking classes with seniors, she has developed meaningful connections as a result of those classes because her classmates have so much to give. Some of her initial difficulty connecting was related to contradictions that she identified in her high school experience where, “They wanted you to work on a team, but then in the greater big wide world you should be the leader…because you’re well educated, you have had all these opportunities and therefore…it took me a little while to realize I wasn’t entitled to the leader role.” This realization in combination with Gail’s willingness to expand her social activities allowed her to develop strong friendships and connections on campus, first in her dorm and more recently in her sorority.

Socially, Gail believes that nobody is prepared for college because it is an intense time when people are working to figure themselves out and may make mistakes as part of that
process. She also mentioned that during high school she was always able to capitalize on relationships and connections in the Cincinnati area to secure internships and other positions, but now that she is out of Cincinnati and looking to establish herself outside of Cincinnati the process is much more difficult because those connections do not extend outside of Ohio. This has been a frustrating realization. Overall, Gail’s experience with high school character education contributed to a foundation of values related to participation, connection, and identity, but left much of the work to be done in the college years as she learned the basic structures and means for applying those values.

**College context and utilization. Increased diversity.** Being at Emory represented a big increase in the level of diversity around race, religion, gender, political perspective, and was also challenging for Gail because people were not always respectful of one another, which created difficult situations. The increased experience of diversity on campus at Emory was an obstacle for Gail in utilizing her experience with character education. There was a great deal more conflict and violence in her new environment at Emory, which was scary to experience. Gail has been exposed to protests and tension around issues of race, religion, and socioeconomic status in her new environment. Gail reported that character education has been pretty impactful on her overall well-being and peer interactions in college, but not hugely because although acceptance was emphasized at CCD it was difficult to gain experience interacting with different kinds of people because of the lack of diversity. Gail arrived to college with the knowledge and belief in acceptance of differences, but without much experience interacting with individuals and groups who were different. Gail reflected on this saying, “I think it was a little bit inhibiting because of my lack of interaction with other kinds of people. Like in theory, I should be able to interact with
anyone because of the tools, but the lack of opportunity within the sphere of high school
hindered me I think.”

In responding to the differences, Gail reported utilizing her character education in much
the same way as she did in high school. She described, “When other people aren’t respecting
other people I have no problem saying, ‘cut it out.’ I don’t know, I think that’s the big one
[experience] because I think in college everyone’s just trying to fit in, but I have no problem
saying, ‘that’s not okay.’” She has found it difficult to manage when someone does not
demonstrate the level of respect that she would expect or hope for, and in these cases she
described largely relying on persistence in getting what she needs from that relationship, and
then moving on. This sense of perseverance is an important aspect of her character that she
believes came from her time at CCD, and something that the environment at Emory has
prompted her to strengthen. Gail stated, “I think persistence is absolutely another character thing
that Country Day taught me, like you just don’t give up.” In one sense, Gail has resisted adapting
her character education to meet the needs of the college environment, and the college context has
largely shaped her utilization of that character education by reinforcing her perseverance as she
bumps up against new and difficult situations.

Case Summary

Gail’s experience of high school character education centered largely on academic
achievement and connections with faculty and peers. She identified character education as
“subtle, but impactful” and did not identify a specific program or curriculum guiding her high
school character education experience. She did identify a variety of values that were associated
with her experience including accountability, manners, kindness, responsibility, effective
communication skills, and perseverance. Gail struggled with the transition to college as her
initial attempt to recreate her high school experience in the college context was ultimately unfulfilling. After recognizing this, Gail was able to establish meaningful connections in the college environment, maintain academic success, and broaden her worldview to reflect the increased diversity on campus.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of each participant as well as the specific themes that emerged from interviews conducted with four college sophomores who experienced high school character education. The information presented in this chapter described how Luke, Lydia, James, and Gail identify their high school character education and how they utilize that character education in the college environment. Each participant gave examples of experiences and activities related to their high school character education, described the ways in which those experiences and activities carried over during the transition to college, and explored how differences between the high school and college environment shape the utilization of high school character education. Across all four interviews, the students referred to expectations that existed in the high school environment and a strong sense of connection and engagement as part of the character education experience, the process of identity formation and establishing new connections as part of the transition to the college environment, and the need to translate values from the high school environment to the college context. These ideas will be explored more fully in the cross-case analysis.

**Chapter 5: Results of Cross-Case Analysis**

A multiple case study design allows for cross-case comparison as a way to reveal similarities across the participants, while at the same time identifying and highlighting the role of context (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). This process allows for a more complex understanding of both
the individual student experiences and the phenomenon of interest. In this study, the cross-case analysis produced five themes: 1) explicit curriculum, 2) faculty involvement & connection, 3) independence and autonomy, 4) creating new connections in college, and 5) diversity. The descriptions that follow capture both consistencies and variations within each cross-case theme, and aim to give voice to participants throughout the analysis. Each theme will be addressed in this chapter.

**Explicit Curriculum**

Each of the four participants in this study graduated from high schools that provided character education as part of the school programming. Students, along with their school counselor or administrator each identified character education within the school setting and described how it existed in their high school. The degree to which this character education appeared as explicit programming varied among the participants, and this variation related to the students’ ability to identify their experience in a way that matched closely with the experience that the school intended to create. This can be seen when comparing the participant’s description of character education and the description provided by the school counselor or school administrator. Further, the degree to which the program incorporated an explicit curriculum also related to the students’ ability to transfer the experience into the college environment. An explicit curriculum promoted common language and consistency of concepts among students and faculty, and also allowed students to intentionally utilize the language and concepts in a new environment.

Lydia and Luke both pointed to overt programs in describing their experience with character education, each with an explicit curriculum designed for use within the context of that specific school. Both programs were scaffolded, providing a higher level of explicit instruction
and practice for younger students, and more flexibility in implementation for older students. The explicit nature of the Academy Alum and Man of Moeller programs were reflected in the considerable overlap between the student description of their experience and the overview of the program that was provided by their school counselor. The explicit nature of their program allowed Luke and Lydia to more fully identify the experience that the school intended to deliver. James and Gail identified their experience with character education as subtle, rather than explicit. James identified character education at CCD as being related to an expectation that students work hard and avoid taking short cuts, and through the collaborative nature of the environment. Gail described her experience with character education as providing tools for academics, while also emphasizing respect for others and manners. Neither James nor Gail described specific structures or systems through which character education was provided.

Luke and Lydia’s experience of high school character education was more consistent with the description provided by their school counselor as compared to James’ or Gail’s experiences and the description that was provided by their upper school division head. The upper school division head at CCD described the character education as consisting of weekly advisory sessions and periodic assemblies. She also emphasized how relationships with teachers were an important component of the program as well as student involvement in service. Among these aspects of character education, James and Gail both identified their relationships with teachers as influential, but neither identified advisory or homeroom as important sources of character education in describing their experience. In describing his experience in advisory James stated, “there wasn’t much activity, it was usually just attendance announcements, that kind of thing.” Gail stated, “my personal advisor in daily morning wouldn’t get that involved, like she would say like what is going on, she wouldn’t force conversation or force camaraderie,
she was just there…” Both James and Gail identified broad behavioral expectations and an emphasis on participation in describing their experience with character education, but this does not provide a full picture of what the upper school division head described as the intended range of experiences.

In addition to being better equipped to identify the character education as it appeared in the high school environment, Luke and Lydia were also well-equipped to carry the framework for their high school character education with them to college. Lydia has internalized the explicit curriculum and utilizes the concepts related to being a woman of faith, integrity, and courage as well as a thinker, leader, nurturer, prophet in her college life. Luke described Man of Moeller as a program intended to help students develop into mature, responsible adults, and he has carried this emphasis with him into college. Though this framework is less specific than the principles Lydia described, Luke continued to reflect upon his actions and how he was living up to this expectation for maturity and responsibility. Each of these frameworks emphasizes the type of person that one is to become, both in terms of specific qualities and characteristics as well as with respect to gender identity as each includes either “man” or “woman” in some aspect of their explicit curriculum. Maturity and growth appear to apply not only to the development of desired traits, but also more broadly to developing gender identity.

With respect to context, both the Academy Alum and Man of Moeller programs emerged from the religious foundation of the Catholic school setting. This foundation allowed for the program to take on a life beyond the high school, with common language not only within the school, but also potentially extending into the student’s place of worship, family setting, or future educational environments. For example, Luke became a member of the Marianist Leadership Scholars, a group at Dayton made up of students from Marianist high schools, and a
group that maintains the same principles that were emphasized in Man of Moeller through a focus on service and leadership. This institutional foundation for character education did not exist for Cincinnati Country Day School, a private, secular high school, and the implicit nature of the programming made it more difficult for the students to walk away with a cohesive set of guiding principles. Across cases, an explicit curriculum emerged as a helpful component of character education in that it provided students with a great ability to identify the aspects of the program that the school intended to deliver, and also allowed students to carry the framework with them into the college environment.

**Faculty Involvement & Connection**

Faculty played an important role in how each participant identified character education in their high school environment. Luke, Lydia, James, and Gail each provided examples of how teachers and school personnel played an active role in providing feedback and guidance during their character education experience. Across cases, participants described how developing connections with their teachers facilitated personal growth. For Luke it was his rugby coach, for Lydia a religion teacher, and for James the advisor of a group of his friends, and for Gail it was a math teacher who made the effort to take a special interest. While the participants identified these individual teachers and coaches as especially impactful, there was also a consensus across cases that these teachers were not outliers within the school and, rather, the majority of teachers and faculty members were strong role models and active in creating meaningful connections with students. On one hand there is a sense that these teachers went above and beyond in connecting with students in an intentional way, but on the other hand there appeared to be a collective understanding and value among all faculty for taking the time to provide this level of support. Teachers serve as the main tool for delivery within the context of a school, and the participants in
this study identified the important way that teachers and faculty created connections between character educations and students’ lives by taking a personal interest.

The importance of faculty connection and involvement emerged across cases, but for Luke, Lydia, and James, the depth of the connection appeared to be especially strong. Gail identified her math teacher, her Spanish teachers, and her advisor as teachers who were influential, largely related to how accessible these teachers were, and how prepared she felt with respect to her academic skills in college. Gail connected these relationships, as well as the character education more broadly, to promoting college readiness for academics. For Luke, Lydia, and James, however, the impact of the connections was more personal. Each of the faculty in their examples demonstrated a deeper interest in their personal well-being and character education, promoting sportsmanship, integration of the character education values into the students’ friendships, and ethical decision-making. For Luke, Lydia, and James, the personal connection was a stronger message than that of the academic or athletic experience, and it is what the students describe now in college when reflecting on their connections with those teachers. Across cases, faculty involvement and connection emerged as a powerful example of how students identified high school character education.

**Independence & Autonomy**

Independence and autonomy emerged across cases as two connected components describing how students utilized their experience with high school character education. Independence emerged as a common thread across cases, describing the newfound freedom and liberation that students experienced living on their own in the college environment. This sense of independence came as a direct result of leaving home and forgoing the structure and predictability of living with parents. Autonomy emerged as a related, yet distinct, thread,
describing the sense of control and command that students experienced in their lives as a result of the increased independence. Whereas independence was experienced across cases in a similar way, the four participants experienced varying levels of autonomy.

Through the Academy Alum and Man of Moeller programs, Lydia and Luke engaged in reflective processes during small group discussions and retreats. Each student described these as opportunities to learn more about themselves, develop a stronger sense of identity, and strengthen skills of self-monitoring and reflection which, in turn, promoted a stronger sense of control and command. In high school and during the transition to college, Lydia and Luke utilized these skills in demonstrating thoughtful decision-making and intentional behavior. Both students articulated their thought processes as they formed new connections and managed the transition into the college environment. Luke described his experience living away from his friends and family saying, “I don’t think often I make a different decision, but I make the decision, which I think is a big difference.” In describing his decision-making process, Luke stated, “being able to look at it like how are my actions going to impact him [his roommate] helped at times, whether or not I actually did that all the time is different, but just looking at decisions in that way I think is very helpful and I think I got that from high school.” James articulated a similar sense of reflection and intentionality, though rather than pointing to his experience with character education as the source of these skills, James identified the transition from Loveland to CCD as the experience that impacted his success in the transition to college. The transfer in high school provided James with rich opportunities for reflecting on how his behavior was perceived by others, how to establish connections in a new environment, and how to integrate into a new environment while maintaining a sense of identity. The depth of reflection and autonomy was not as developed as it was for Luke or Lydia, but this opportunity for James
to enter a new environment, create new connections, and have the chance to start fresh all contributed to his ability to develop a sense of control and command over his decision-making in strengthening his sense of autonomy.

Gail experienced increased independence, but limited autonomy during the initial stages of her transition to the college environment. Unlike Lydia and Luke, Gail did not describe activities or experiences in high school character education as promoting a strong sense of self-monitoring or reflection, and because she spent her entire K-12 experience in the same setting, she did not have an opportunity to learn those skills through transition like James did. Autonomy was related to intentionality, that is to say the students described autonomy as it related to an increased sense of control and command that students felt in establishing their independence.

**Creating New Connections in College**

Establishing new connections with peers and professors in the college environment is a demanding process, and one that each participant highlighted as they described the transition to college. Across cases, participants described a strong ability to connect with college professors and a general comfort for engaging with adults as a result of the relationships that they established with teachers in the high school environment. As described previously, the emphasis on character education within the high school environment promoted a deeper connection with teachers, who serve as the main tool by which the character education was delivered. Across cases, students felt prepared to develop connections with faculty and were successful in doing so in the college environment. Moving to the college environment also required students to reimagine relationships with family and friends from high school. Though the relationships were established, students were forced to find new ways to connect with parents and close friends. Lydia, James, and Gail each described how separation impacted their relationships and required
them to establish new means for connecting with values friends and family. Luke was the only participant who did not identify this as an important aspect of creating new connections.

For Luke and Lydia, the high school character education they received provided opportunities to develop skills for creating new connections with peers including self-disclosure and empathy. Entering into college, Luke described that everyone was initially outgoing and it was not difficult to make a “whole bunch” of friends. Luke described the importance of community, as emphasized in his high school character education experience, and the importance of being considerate to others when he stated, “that sense of trying to be as helpful towards to people around you as you can…that was a pretty big influence on me now, like how are my decisions affecting the people around me.” This awareness of and consideration for others extended from his high school character education and allowed Luke to create connections in college. Lydia described herself as a person who, “people could talk to about issues they were having” and in the college environment she found this to be especially helpful as she and her peers managed the transition process. She described how this role, “ties a lot into the ways of thinker, leader, nurtured, prophet, mostly the nurturer and leader ways…so when I was building my relationships with new people I definitely kept that as a part of me.” Both Luke and Lydia pointed to activities like Kairos and small group discussions within their character education experiences that provided opportunities for students to develop empathy through self-disclosure and shared experience. Luke and Lydia both described the impact of these experiences and how this sense of vulnerability created space for connection with peers, and both carried these lessons into the college environment as they established new connections.

During his transfer from Loveland to CCD, James developed skills for creating new connections, both with adults and with his peers, and these skills extended into the college
environment when he was once again faced with establishing new friendships. James describes W&L as a bigger version of CCD, and James utilized the same approach to creating connections that he did in his transition from Loveland to CCD. As a member of the soccer team at both CCD and W&L, James entered into his new environments with a built-in support network of peers with similar interests. These teammates helped facilitate additional social connections. Later in college, James joined a fraternity and has established close relationships within that small group as well. James did not describe the same level of intentionality in finding and establishing connections within the college environment as compared to Luke and Lydia, but he did describe the process as a successful one. James was ultimately able to establish these connections, but he developed these skills for connection outside of the character education he received at CCD.

For Gail, connecting with professors came easily, but she faced more obstacles in initially establishing connections with her peers. Ultimately she was able to utilize her extraversion and reach out to make new friends, and later join a sorority. CCD did not provide the kind of targeted instruction or practice that Luke and Lydia experienced in learning how to connect with others, and because Gail was at CCD from kindergarten through her senior year, she never faced the challenge or opportunity of establishing all new connections until she entered the college environment. Reflecting on her initial transition to college, Gail reported difficulty connecting with her peers. A self-identified extrovert, she entered the college environment after thirteen years in the same school and described, “it was still pretty hard because I’d had the same friends for so long.” Gail was out of practice in establishing new connections, though she described, “fostering good relationships” as the second priority behind earning good grades at CCD. Gail was ultimately successful in establishing new connections, describing the process as, “making a new friend in class, making a new friend in a club, in my sorority, and figuring out what I liked,
what I didn’t. I felt like in high school there wasn’t much of a choice about who I was going to
hand out with…I wanted meaningful relationships and I figured that out when I was in college.”
The hardest part of the process for Gail was, “getting outside of the [dorm] room,” but once she
was able to engage in the school community she was successful in establishing meaningful
connections. Coming out of her experience at CCD Gail valued connection and friendship, but it
took time for her to develop the skills in order to achieve these connections.

Across cases, participants identified the importance of reaching out to establish new
connections rather than relying on someone else to reach out and connect with them. After initial
difficulty, Gail began knocking on the doors in her dorm and joined a sorority. Lydia engaged in
her learning community and made intentional choices to be the kind of person who others could
go to for help. James sought out groups of students with similar interests through participation in
both the soccer team and a fraternity. Luke settled into his dorm connections and maintained
those relationships into his second year, demonstrating awareness for how his actions impacted
those around him. Each participant described connection as a central value within the character
education experience, though Luke and Lydia were able to point to specific activities that
promoted the development of these skills while James and Gail developed these skills outside of
their experience with high school character education.

Diversity

Diversity emerged as a salient aspect of the college context that, across three of the four
participants, served to shape the utilization of character education. While each of the participants
discussed having some level of previous knowledge regarding diversity and multiculturalism,
there was less of a sense of previous exposure to or engagement with people from diverse
backgrounds. Luke’s experience in high school was largely homogeneous but valued tolerance,
so he appreciated the increased diversity on the college campus. He captured this saying, “I think it [diversity] makes me a more well-rounded person and it really makes me be more intentional about the way that I’m acting. I have to go out and make sure that I’m being a good person instead of just coasting on it.” Lydia also described her high school environment as lacking in diversity while maintaining an emphasis on inclusion. Her college roommate was actively involved in the “LGBTQ culture” at UC, and the experience expanded Lydia’s awareness. She described, “she was just like such a shock to me, you know, my roommate was and just like learning about her and, um, I guess she just reminded me of how I am a very accepting person, but she showed me ways I could be more accepting.” For both Lydia and Luke, the increased diversity within the college context was new, but was ultimately manageable based on the skills and values they internalized through their experience with high school character education.

Gail described her experience coming out of a homogeneous high school that held an expectation for tolerance, but little instruction or practice for engaging with people from diverse backgrounds. Gail stated, “the amount of knowledge I had about different cultures, different religions, whatever, helped me understand where people were coming from [in college]” but the lack of diversity within her high school environment and the absence of targeted opportunities to develop these skills resulted in an inability to translate that knowledge into action. Gail described, “in theory I should be able to interact with anyone because of the tools, but the lack of the opportunity within the sphere of high school hindered me I think.”

James was the only participant who did not face increased diversity in the college environment. In transferring to CCD, James experienced a more diverse setting than in his previous high school, specifically with respect to socioeconomic status and ethnicity. In comparing the diversity of CCD to his previous high school, James also noted that CCD was also
a more diverse setting that W&L. The discussion of diversity within the college environment was largely absent from our interview. The similarity of environment, specifically related to diversity, shaped James’ utilization of character education in that he is not forced to face the obstacle of managing increased diversity, and as a result has not developed those skills and competencies.

Despite the lack of exposure to diverse backgrounds in the high school environment, Luke and Lydia both developed skills of tolerance and acceptance through participation in activities within the Man of Moeller and Academy Alum programs. The increased diversity in the college environment prompted them to extend those skills in developing a deeper appreciation for the many aspects of diversity and allowed them to engage in the environment without becoming overwhelmed. Gail did not experience diversity or practice the skills of tolerance or acceptance in high school, and did feel overwhelmed by the increased diversity in college. She is still engaged in the task of learning how to process and manage cultural differences related to aspects of diversity, and this has served as a meaningful challenge in her transition. For Luke, Lydia, and Gail, the increased sense of diversity on the college campus challenged them to be more intentional in utilizing their experience with character education and required them to strengthen the general sense of tolerance and acceptance they developed in high school, gaining experience with students from diverse backgrounds and working to honor and appreciate differences in their peers.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the five themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis of interviews conducted with four college sophomores who experienced high school character education. These themes emerged as both meaningful and reoccuring concepts that appeared
across the interviews with Luke, Lydia, James, and Gail. The themes address how students identified their experience with high school education through explicit curriculum and involvement of faculty, how students utilized their character education through independence and autonomy as well as through creating new connections in the college environment, and how diversity served to shape the utilization of character education in the college context.
Chapter 6: Discussion

This final chapter serves as a closing discussion for the current multiple case study, exploring how high school character education existed in the lives of four young adults in the college environment. In addition to discussion of each subquestion and theoretical implications, this chapter also includes study limitations and implications for future counseling and research, as well as specific recommendations for school counselors and administrators who are interested in implementing high school character education or strengthening their existing program. The last section of the discussion section provides concluding thoughts.

**Research Subquestion #1: How do college students identify high school character education in their own high school?**

The four college students in this study identified their high school character education through a variety of ways. College students pointed to the overall school culture in recognizing the character education they received, as well as more specific aspects of their experience including the presence of an explicit curriculum. Luke and Lydia both described explicit curriculums, while Gail and James identified broader cultural expectations for honesty and manners. Student also identified high school character education by describing the specific qualities and characteristics that were valued within the school environment, and the activities and opportunities for practice that were designed and implemented as part of the school day. For Luke, integrity was a central quality within the Man of Moeller framework, and all four participants identified respect and acceptance as valued characteristics within their school. Luke and Lydia both described a range of activities including direct instruction, small group discussion, class and all school masses, class retreats, guest speakers, and service events. An emphasis on activity and practice was notably absent from the interviews with James and Gail,
who both identified their experience with character education as mainly consisting of behavioral expectations and participation within the community. Luke and Lydia also identified their experience with character education by highlighting community and connection, specifically the meaningful relationships they developed with teachers that supported the character lessons.

Quinlan and colleagues (2011) found that character strengths have been taught in schools through story-telling techniques, school-wide festivals and assemblies, and self-focused (reflective) activities that encourage students to identify and consider their own unique strengths. In this study, Lydia did identify what may be considered story-telling techniques when she described the exercised in the Academy Alum program where freshmen would, “read the examples of the characteristics on one side and then write down some examples of how you could or could not be those characteristics.” Luke, James, and Gail did not describe similar story-telling techniques, but Luke, James, and Lydia did all describe school-wide assemblies (as well as class assemblies) as part of their experience with character education. Further, Luke and Lydia described reflective activities through which students were encouraged to identify and consider their own unique strengths, though not specific to character strengths.

The class retreats that Luke and Lydia both described (junior retreat and Kairos) represent concentrated efforts to promote identity development and a sense of community and connection through this reflective process. During these multiple-day retreats, students were given time and space to experience self-disclosure, vulnerability, and acceptance, considering their own strengths as individuals. These processes promote character development in a way that elevates personal growth well beyond what is possible through classroom instruction. Though some students may be more likely to fully engage in these experiences than others, these retreats created an expectation for teenage students to open themselves by sharing significant personal
experiences in an environment of safety and acceptance. Luke and Lydia both highlighted the value of these experiences, and the self-esteem and sense of identity that resulted from experiencing that sense of vulnerability and validation.

In addition to activities, college students also identified teacher involvement as an important component of high school character education. Research supports the role that teachers play in providing a consistent presence within the high school environment, providing direct instruction and serving as role models by personifying the important values and concepts with the school community (Milson, 2000; Quinlan et al. 2011). Beyond these established roles, participants in this study also identified how personal connections with teachers served to strengthen and reinforce those values and concepts. Each participant named multiple examples of teachers who playing an important role in their experience of character education. For Luke, Lydia, and James, these adults took a personal interest in their development, while for Gail the emphasis surrounded academics. Teachers, coaches, and school administrators serve as the most stable and reliable representation of the values and concepts within the school, and are in a position of authority for establishing and monitoring the standards for student behavior from context to context (classroom, field, hallways, etc.). The relationships with teachers and coaches allow students to strengthen their own sense of identify and character, and also promote a deeper connection to the school.

Another important component for students as they identify high school character education is the clarity with which the programming is implemented. Previous research conducted on character education has not explored the extent to which student descriptions of character education align with school counselor or administrator descriptions of that same programming, but the findings of this study suggest that school counselors and administrators
may be well served to make clear the structure and programming provided to target character education. Developing an explicit curriculum represents an overt attempt to incorporate character education into a school community by designing and implementing instruction, meetings, and activities to introduce, reinforce, and practice a certain set of standards for behavior. When character education is implemented as an overt curriculum, students and teachers benefit from the transparency of expectations and the opportunity for common language and goals. Lydia described the activities and concepts addressed in the Academy Alum program and Luke outlined the Man of Moeller program, and both students were able to identify the progression of that program over time in their own lives and in the life of the school. Structured curriculums are built upon specific values and concepts that guide the school effort in promoting personal growth and development. Other, less formal activities can include classroom discussions or debates that center on important values and concepts within the school and participation in clubs or groups on campus that reinforce the cultural expectations for specific values. For example, James and Gail both discussed the Honor Council at CCD as part of their experience with character education, though neither shared specific examples of times when they engaged directly with the governing body. The expectations that the Honor Council represented and enforced (honesty, integrity) were part of the larger sense of guiding values and concepts within the school, and the existence of the group provided students with motivation to practice those values in their daily lives.

A stated curriculum with clear expectations can be seamlessly integrated into the life of the school in a variety of ways as it may be reflected in the mission statement, infused into the classroom, reinforced on the playing field, and present in the everyday interactions among the students. The result is a set of implied cultural expectations that serve as part of the larger school community, reinforcing the stated values of the character education program. Lydia referred to
the mission of the school on multiple occasions, “empowering students to become women of faith, integrity, and courage,” and Lydia was also able to point directly to have the single-sex model empowered female students, how the school built upon the foundation of the Catholic faith through religion classes and masses, the emphasis on living honestly and openly, and the importance of being strong and vulnerable in developing confidence and relationships. The congruency between the overarching mission of the school and the day-to-day messages and activities that students received allowed Lydia to develop a clear understanding for what she, as a student, was expected to strive toward. Similarly, Luke described Man of Moeller as working to promote integrity and maturity in students, and he identified group instruction, classroom discussions, and homeroom as promoting this sense of maturity in students along with a strong value for doing things the right way. Without an explicit curriculum, students are more likely to interpret implicit messages without a strong sense of consistency. Although James and Gail experienced character education in the same environment, their descriptions of that experience did not present a consistent picture. Further, neither James nor Gail identified their experience with character education with the sense of specificity and intention that their upper school division head described in explaining the programming from an administrator’s level. Explicitly stated values and concepts help students by outlining the behavioral expectations within the environment, which helps to set the boundaries by which to live. However, the values and concepts must be clearly stated and consistently reinforced in order to give students the opportunity to identify and internalize those values.

Milson (2000) suggests that, “Perhaps the most important and lasting character lessons occur when teachers model the traits they espouse and when students have the opportunity to practice good character through classroom activities, service learning, or conflict resolution” (p.
92). The results from this multiple case study suggest that Milson’s suggestion only provides part of the picture. Yes, students benefit from teachers who model the values and concepts emphasized within the school, and students also require opportunities for practice. The most important and lasting character lessons, however, appear to also rely on personal connections with teachers and opportunities not only for practice, but also for reflection and connection. Further, the lessons must be explicit in nature, providing students with clear and consistent messaging and language describing the traits and characteristics that exist as the core set of values within the school environment. Taken together, students identified character education through an explicit curriculum, as part of the larger school culture, through activities and practice, and in connections with school faculty and personnel.

**Research Subquestion #2: How do college students utilize their high school character education?**

Across cases, college students utilized their high school character education experience through increased independence and autonomy, and by creating new connections. Participants all highlighted increased independence as a challenging aspect of the transition to college, and one that required the application of skills and tools that were developed in high school. Independence from social roles and typical adult expectations is a hallmark of emerging adulthood, the developmental stage described by Arnett (2000). During this time, students explore possibilities related to love, work, and worldview as students confront opportunities for growth with respect to building values, competencies, attitudes, beliefs, identity, relationships, and self-concept (Lounsbury et al., 2009). Specifically, college students experience greater independence as they learn to manage an increasingly flexible schedule, generally with much more unsupervised and potentially unstructured time than their high school environment allowed. Luke specifically
described how living on his own provided him with the space he needed to feel more autonomous in his decision making, though interestingly he also reported that his decision making process was largely unchanged compared to when he lived under his parents’ supervision. Living independently from parents provides the opportunity for students to embrace their sense of command and control, living more intentionally as they navigate their new environment.

Across participants, college students utilized character education in a variety of ways that related to independence and autonomy. Specifically, students described decision-making and reflecting on those decisions as processes that came with the increased independence of living on their own. Further, the increased sense of independence promoted greater autonomy as students experienced more command and control in their decision-making and had time and space to reflect on their decisions without feeling the pressure of parental supervision. The decision-making process relies on the ability to choose among several options, and occurs many times throughout the day. The ability to reflect on decisions requires self-monitoring and a willingness to think critically about past decisions and behaviors in order to make different decisions in the future. Luke and Lydia both described self-monitoring and reflection as informative processes in their decision-making strategies, thinking back on previous experiences and incorporating their learning into future decisions. High school students may develop these important skills of self-monitoring and critical thinking through high school character education, and strengthen those skills by engaging in reflection both in high school as well as later in life. For Luke and Lydia, junior retreat and Kairos emerged as powerful opportunities for reflection. Gail and Lydia both described a reflective component related to guest speakers as part of their character education experience, creating time for reflection and a broader worldview. Luke and Lydia also described
reflective components as part of the Man of Moeller and Academy Alum program, where students would consider and discuss important values and concepts individually and in small groups. An explicit curriculum may be especially helpful in prompting students to develop skills for decision-making and reflection by providing overt opportunities to strengthen and develop those skills as well as time and space to reflect on the experience. Students who engage in reflection are more likely to wrestle with their decisions and learn from past mistakes. Reflection can also prompt deeper engagement as students consider how their character education may apply directly to certain situations, and how it may need to be adjusted or amended to remain relevant in a new context. Lydia referred many times to her reflective process, either individually or through conversation with others, incorporating the frameworks from her experience with character education and described how she is working to adapt those frameworks to the pressures of the college context. Part of Gail’s early struggle to adapt to the college environment was related to her initial strategy of operating within the college context in much the same way that she did in high school, failing to demonstrate flexibility in her approach. Students who enter a new environment with a narrow set of behaviors that were successful in the past and a rigid approach in applying those behaviors must rely solely on goodness of fit within that environment to allow for continued success, while students who come equipped with the skills and willingness to respond with flexibility and adapt to the demands of the new environment are more able to create opportunities for success and sustain in that environment.

In addition to the emphasis on independence and autonomy, the other most powerful theme that emerged from the four college participants regarding the utilization on high school character education was the skill set that students developed for establishing connections with others. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) outlined the most commonly affected outcomes of character
education programs, and among these were socio-moral cognition, pro-social behaviors and attitudes, problem-solving skills, emotional competency, academic achievement, and attachment to school. Though the purpose of this study was not to measure “outcomes,” an interesting overlap exists between the common outcomes presented by Berkowitz and Bier (2005) and the descriptions that the participants in this study provided in describing how they utilized their experience with character education, especially with respect to the skills required in connecting with others. This skill set reflects the pro-social behaviors and attitudes, emotional competency, and connection to school as described as common outcomes of character education by Berkowitz and Bier (2005). The ability to foster and maintain meaningful relationships with peers and teachers was highlighted across cases as something that was developed during high school character education and extended to the college context. Through these experiences in high school, students learn to value relationships and develop the confidence and vulnerability that are required to connect with someone new. Gail, in particular, highlighted the importance of getting out of her comfort zone and working to find friends, meet professors, and take an active role in creating a new support system once in the college environment, though she faced initial obstacles in achieving this during her transition to the college environment. James emphasized the skills he developed for communicating effectively with teachers and adults, and the important role that those skills have had in his confidence and personal development. Many students enter the college environment without confidence or skill in establishing relationships with professors and miss out on opportunities to deepen their learning, create professional connections, and learn more about themselves as students and as people.
Research Subquestion #3: How does the college student’s context shape the utilization of character education?

Diversity within the college context emerged as an important aspect of the college context that, across three of the four participants, served to shape the utilization of character education. Luke, Lydia, and Gail each highlighted the increase in diversity that they experienced as they transitioned from their high school environment to college. Luke explicitly outlined how he perceived the increase in diversity, and how it required him to be more intentional in his acceptance of others. He described how acceptance was easier in a homogeneous high school environment. With increased diversity on the college campus, students must work harder to maintain their sense of inclusivity and acceptance. Students who face this situation may experience less discomfort than if they remained in a more homogenous environment, never forced to acknowledge the awkwardness or personal discomfort that comes with the recognition of power and privilege. Despite the discomfort, however, these experiences serve to promote growth and development in college students. An increasingly diverse college environment challenges students to be increasingly tolerant and accepting of others, a value that emerged across participants as an important component of character education programming. Proctor (2011) found that character strengths knowledge and use promoted an appreciation for diversity and strengths promotion as students begin to recognize and value authenticity, but this finding has not been extended to specifically address diversity as it relates to various aspects of cultural diversity like race, ethnic, religion, or socioeconomic status. Exposure to new and different backgrounds challenges college students to expand their awareness, and allows students to better understand and appreciate differences (Boisjoly et al., 2006). Through exposing students to a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures while maintaining an emphasis on diversity and
acceptance, high school character education programs can promote inclusivity and help students develop the skills for tolerance.

Another important consideration with respect to diversity relates to how high school character education programming prepares students to address diversity in a new environment. Students who face differences within the college environment must decide whether to maintain their established characteristics and patterns of behavior or translate their values and actions to suit the needs of the new environment and find success. This may be the difference between a school that emphasizes either content or process. A school that emphasized content might encourage students to be nice or well mannered, while a school that emphasized process might encourage students to maintain an open mind when facing new people or ideas. Though this difference may be subtle, one approach emphasizes specific content or behavior, directing students to be kind, while the other highlights process, emphasizing information gathering and intentional decision-making. Students who have a clear sense for process and understand where their values are rooted may be better suited to demonstrate flexibility and the ability to adapt to new circumstances. By understanding the foundation upon which their values and expectations are built, students can be more thoughtful in selecting how and when certain qualities and characteristics are important.

In developing this process-oriented foundation during high school questions like, “Why do we live this way?” or “Why are these values our values/habits/practices?” may help students understand how the core values or concepts apply when the culture or environment change. Programs that emphasize content, that is to say those programs that encourage adherence to a strict set of specific values or characteristics, may miss the opportunity for students to struggle with why they value what they value. Rather than content, programs can encourage students to
shift the focus from a handful of character traits and instead focus on the process that exists for individuals who engage in reflection and intentional living. Helping students understand why they are doing what they are doing will better equip them to succeed across contexts, especially in new and different environments. Through struggling with diversity, college students learn to adapt their worldview and skills as required by the new environment. Taken together, the college context impacts the utilization of character education as students who experience increased diversity have the opportunity to adapt their skills to meet the needs of their new environment.

**Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study add a new perspective to the existing theory and research on high school character education, extending the investigation to include the voice and experiences of college students. Character education, as described by the participants within this study, can serve to help students live in an authentic and meaningful way. Short-term, quantitative studies have found character strengths to be associated with fewer negative outcomes like substance use and depression, as well as school success, kindness, the development of the emotional competencies students need to thrive (Park, 2004; Seligman et al., 2009). Though not measured directly in this study, school success, kindness, and emotional competencies were threads that ran through the accounts of each participant. The ability to develop meaningful connections with others was another central theme that emerged across cases, which is related to the development of emotional competency. Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that high school character education is used meaningfully both in high school and beyond and is characterized by growth with respect to personal factors like independence and autonomy, but also has important benefits for students’ ability to establish meaningful relationships with others.
Another theoretical contribution of this study is the importance of an explicit curriculum in making clear for students the character education programming within the school. Existing research has not explored or emphasized transparency as an important aspect of character education programming. Explicit programs provided consistency and common language, promoting clear expectations for students in the classroom, on the athletic field, and in everyday interactions with peers and adults. The well-defined programming promoted strong retention of concepts years later, as well as an ability to transfer that set of knowledge and experiences into the college context and adapt as needed to meet the new demands of the environment. Without an explicit curriculum to guide student experience, James and Gail were left to create their own connections from experience to experience, and were less able to identify a coherent program by which they gained skills and perspective related to character education.

As previously discussed, the CEP Principles outline that effective character education:

(1) promotes core values; (2) defines character to include thinking, feeling, and doing; (3) uses a comprehensive approach; (4) creates a caring community; (5) provides students with opportunities for moral action; (6) offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum; (7) fosters students’ self-motivation; (8) engages staff as a learning community; (9) fosters shared leadership; (10) engages families and community members as partners; and (11) assesses the culture and climate of school (CEP, 2010, p. 28).

With the exception of the final two, this study largely supports each of these principles, especially as they relate to the presence of an explicit curriculum within the character education program. The role of families and community members as partners did not emerge as a
meaningful aspect of high school character education in this study, and students did not describe ways in which the character education in their school assessed the culture and climate of the school. The remaining principles, however, do connect closely to how participants described their experiences with character education, especially in the cases where students could point to an explicit curriculum in identifying the structure and implementation of the programming. Luke and Lydia identified their experience with the Man of Moeller and Academy Alum program as part of a comprehensive approach within the school, describing core values and connecting to the mission of the school. The programming appeared in a variety of settings including in the classroom, on the sports field, and through structured activities like Kairos and junior retreat. James and Gail both described components of their experience with character education as occurring across environments, though their experiences did not reflect the comprehensive nature of the Man or Moeller or Academy Alum programs. All four students did describe their high school environments as caring communities where teachers and coaches were accessible and involved. Further, concepts like tolerance and acceptance were emphasized across cases, along with kindness and collaboration. Luke and Lydia described a range of activities related to the explicit curriculum of Man of Moeller and Academy Alum that incorporated practice and reflection related to the development of good character including small group meetings and discussions during freshman year, classroom debates and discussion in later years, and junior retreat and Kairos in their final years. James and Gail did not provide the same sense of practice, though they did both identify the Honor Council as an important presence on campus, encouraging students to maintain academic integrity through their coursework. Across cases, students identified a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum as part of their high school experience. One of the strongest themes that emerged across cases was the extent to
which teachers and coaches were engaged members of the learning community. The sense of involvement and connection with teachers and coaches was quite strong across participants, with Luke, Lydia, and James each describing personal connections with faculty. Finally, each of the students in this study described the ways in which shared leadership was fostered within their environment, highlighting the active role that students played in clubs and homeroom. Luke and Lydia were able to point directly to components of their explicit curriculums, describing the important role of students in the Kairos experience, serving as student leaders and providing reflections for classmates to consider and discussion. Luke also highlighted opportunities for student leadership in homeroom. Taken together, the CEP principles provide interesting and meaningful overlap with the findings from this study, highlighting the ways in which an explicit curriculum may serve to strengthen the student’s ability to identify and describe various aspect of the character education program.

A final theory that can be considered within the current findings is the distinction between performance character and moral character as described by Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov (2008). Lydia’s case provides an interesting lens through which to view the framework. Lydia largely identified her experience with high school character education through the framework of “thinker, leader, nurturer, prophet” set forth through the Academy Alum programming as well as through the mission of the school, empowering women of faith, integrity, and courage. The Academy Alum framework represents examples of performance character. The language of “thinker, leader, nurturer, prophet” invokes action, calling students to move toward their best selves and take steps to give their best effort across environments. Lydia’s description of her experience in high school demonstrates this approach. The concepts within the mission statement, on the other hand, point to moral character. Faith, integrity, and
courage describe values and skills that allow individuals to treat themselves and others with respect and care, and enable students to live with principle while honoring the interests of others (Davidson et al., 2008). In Lydia’s case, the two central frameworks for her experience with character education provided a balance between moral and performance character, prompting her to develop both aspects of character in her high school environment. Although Luke could not recall all five of the teachings of a Marionist Charism, adaptation to change and respect for community were two that he remembered as being central to his experience. Adaptation to change represents an example of performance character, calling students to stay true to themselves and maintain their values no matter what is happening around them. Respect for community points to moral character, encouraging students to attend to those around them and provide support and care. Luke, like Lydia, describes a balance of performance character focused on action and achievement, and moral character focused on care for self and others. Neither James nor Gail described a set of concepts or values as guiding their experience, making it more difficult to clearly distinguish the programming based on this framework. The emphasis on achievement within the school environment suggests performance character as students were encouraged to give their best efforts in academics and on the sports field, while the emphasis on openness and respect suggest moral character as students were expected to treat their peers with kindness and care. Taken together, this study provides a new lens through which to view existing theories and frameworks, and also provides new contributions to the literature.

**Study Limitations & Implications**

This study aimed to address the current gap in the literature by narrowing the focus of the investigation of high school character education to emphasize student experience and the function of high school character education once students enter the college environment. The
results from this qualitative study provide insight into the potential ways in which high school character education carries into the college context, as well as how that character education served these students as they faced successes and struggles during the transition from high school to college. This section will address both the limitations of this study as well as implications for practice and future research.

Although the original intention was to recruit students from both public and private schools, I was unable to secure participants from public school settings. In total, I contacted nine schools directly and sought referrals from school counselors in my attempt to find public schools that met the inclusion criteria. The school counselors who responded from the six public schools that I contacted reported that they either did not implement a character education program that students would be able to identify, or that their programming was new enough that college sophomores would have not experienced it during their time at high school. The resulting participant pool included four students from three private day schools; one female participant from a private, Catholic, single-six high school, one male participant from a private, Catholic, single-sex high school, and one male and one female participant from the same private, independent, co-educational high school.

The participants in this study represent a relatively homogenous and privileged group. During the recruitment process with school counselors and administrators I outlined that race and ethnicity were unrestricted for inclusion, and requested that school counselors and administrators carefully consider students from traditionally underrepresented races and ethnicities. The resulting participant pool, however, does not represent a diverse set of backgrounds. As school counselors and administrators served as gatekeepers in this study, I relied on their recommendation and their willingness to connect me directly with alumni/ae from their school.
Socioeconomic status was not mentioned in my recruitment communication, nor did I collect this information from participants. The participants did provide a balance of genders as well as religiously affiliated and independent schools. Though it has never been the intention of this qualitative, multiple case study to generalize findings, the examples presented here serve as valuable cases of college students who experienced high school character education, and the lasting impact of that experience.

The personal characteristics of the interviewer, including style, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, and other factors influence the participants’ responses. The interviews that I conducted may have yielded different responses if conducted by a male researcher, or by an older (or younger) female researcher, or by a researcher of a different race. This reality does not necessarily serve as a functional limitation to the study as the same limiting factors (age, gender, etc.) would exist for any given researcher, but it is important to recognize that my personal characteristics likely influenced participant responses. Similarly, the findings of this study may be subject to other analyses since they emerged from my interpretation of the data. Merriam (1998) asserts that all data must be interpreted since they cannot speak for themselves, and Yin (2014) states that the process relies on “argumentative interpretation not numeric tallies” (p. 167). As such, my perspective, including personal traits and biases, is present throughout this study as I was the main tool for data collection and analysis.

Despite the potential limitations, this study addressed the experience of students beyond the high school environment as well as the ways in which their character education exists in the college environment. Further, the study gives voice to the students in describing their own experience, rather than relying on quantitative measures or on school administrators or faculty to describe the process. Finally, as a result of the long-term focus and use of student voice, this
study fills a gap in the literature and provides new ways of thinking about the kinds of experiences that school counselors and administrators may wish to create for students in the future.

The findings from this study have the potential to provide insight into those aspects of character education that persist into college, and may also serve to spark consideration for how character education programs may serve students once they leave the high school environment. Specifically, this study has implications for both practice and research. With respect to the practical implications of this study, school counselors and administrators who are currently implementing a character education program may consider the ways in which their program provides a structured, scaffold curriculum. Students benefit from the transparency and common language promoted through a structured program, and a scaffold program allows for students to practice and strengthen character over time. More specifically, the practice must promote connection and feedback from teachers and peers. Students require feedback from others in order to develop skills of self-monitoring and reflection, and strong character education programs serve to promote connection and feedback through both formal and informal means.

Religiously affiliated schools may have an advantage in designing and implementing explicit character education programming. Faith-based school environments have the opportunity to utilize a bank of common language surrounding values and characteristics. Wilhelm and Firmin (2008) assert that secular schools are limited in their potential to deliver character education because there is no, “core, shared values or common practices” that exist. Alternatively, each religion includes an established set of core values that outline those qualities and traits that individuals should strive to achieve. For public and secular independent schools, establishing an agreed-upon core set of values and characteristics may be more demanding of
time and resources. Starting from scratch requires consensus and buy-in from stakeholders including administrators, teachers, and students, and should consider input from parents and community members as well. Once established, the school must work to reinforce those chosen values, recognizing that students will benefit from clarity and consistency of message. Despite the added layer of work, however, public and secular independent schools may benefit from the lack of restriction in identifying and selecting a core set of values and characteristics. Faith-based schools may have a more narrow range of possibilities in order to stay “on message” and avoid contradicting any teachings within the church. A public or secular independent school, on the other hand, likely has more freedom in setting the direction for the character education programming.

College counselors may consider the potential benefits for students who enter the college environment with character education experience, as well as the potential disadvantages for students who arrive without that kind of explicit instruction. Learning communities provide an important context in the college environment, serving to force students to engage with one another in meaningful ways, leveraging similar experiences (common major) as a means for promoting connection (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Students who arrive to college with character education and participate in groups like learning communities can model and strengthen the skills and competencies they established during high school, and students to arrive to college without this targeted experience can benefit from the structured interaction and opportunity to begin practicing and strengthening skills of connection and feedback.

Future research could extend the current study by how college students who experienced high school character education compare to their peers for whom character education was absent during the high school experience. This question could look specifically at academic success and
overall well-being in order to establish quantitative measures for comparison. Future research could also examine the experience of students who do not attend college after graduating high school, and instead have the opportunity to apply their experience with character education in a variety of other contexts (work, military, etc.). The educational landscape is shifting, and many students are wrestling with financial and other practical barriers to a four-year college education. These students would likely also benefit from the skills of self-monitoring and reflection, as well as the overall growth and sense of connection that high school character education serves to promote, but it is unclear how those experiences might serve to enhance success in environments outside of education.

Future research could also consider the reflective process more closely as part of character education programming, specifically as it relates to the development of empathy and interpersonal skills and awareness. Luke and Lydia both emphasized the importance of junior retreat and Kairos, experiences that built not only skills of internal reflection, but also skills of vulnerability and empathy. Through the exchange of ideas and perspectives, Luke and Lydia described how vulnerability and connection expanded their perspective and helped them recognize the commonalities between themselves and their peers. Interpersonal awareness and skills are necessary in establishing prosocial connections and fostering and developing relationships, which emerged as an important theme in how students utilize character education. The reflective process may open doors for developing and strengthening these skills, but this requires further research.

Another area for future research moves away from the student perspective and focuses on how teachers view their role in character education programming. Each of the four participants in this study described their relationships with their high school teachers as an important
component of their high school character education experience. Luke, Lydia, and James each described the strong personal connections that they established with their teachers and coaches who seemed to go above and beyond the expected commitment level of a high school teacher or coach. In their interviews, however, the participants identified that the specific adult with whom they established a close connection not as an outlier within the larger faculty. Rather, the teachers and school personnel were generally all viewed as accessible and caring, suggesting that this high level of engagement was not, in fact, “above and beyond” the call of duty, but rather an implicit expectation for teachers, coaches, and other adults in the high school context. Future research could address teacher perceptions of what it means to work in a high school that provides character education, and the extent to which their job requires the kind of accessibility and personal connection that students identified and described in their interviews.

**Recommendations**

School counselors and others school personnel interested in developing or refining a character education program within the high school context is likely to find, “a massive collection of advice, unfortunately often conflicting…frequently not based in scientific evidence and theory” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014). The following recommendations provide a unique voice in this conversation, however, emerging as a result of careful investigation of student experience. They are intended to prompt further consideration for how high school character education can best serve students into college and beyond.

1. Develop an explicit, tailored character education program that provides a clear framework for students. A clear framework may include a mission statement and/or a few key words of phrases that capture the central tenants and themes of the program. This framework provides common language that students and faculty can incorporate into
their work inside and outside of the classroom, and promotes transparency and consistency by helping everyone maintain a clear sense for the intended goals and objectives within the programming.

2. Scaffold the tailored character education program by teaching through explicit instruction in early years and then allow for greater autonomy in application in later years. Bruner (1960) introduced the concept of the spiral curriculum, that is teaching concepts at an age-appropriate level in order to initially introduce the material, and then revisit the concepts again and again with increasing complexity as the student develops and matures. Programs can incorporate this approach by initially introducing complex concepts to students through direct instruction and by providing examples that illustrate the qualities and characteristics they wish to instill in their students. This may include definitions, quotations, examples of individuals or entertaining stories that incorporate and illuminate those qualities and characteristics. Students should be given time and space to ask questions or provide feedback on their perceptions regarding those examples, develop their own examples from their experience, and begin to identify places in their own lives where the qualities and characteristics could apply, promoting autonomy as they experience a greater level of command and control over the process. Through repetition and increasing complexity, students have the ability to master and retain the concepts and characteristics emphasized within the environment.

3. Encourage faculty to take an active role not only in the character education process, but also in their relationships with students. Faculty serve not only as role models in the school environment, but, in the best case for character education, also develop strong personal connections with students while maintaining professional boundaries. High
school students rely on teachers and school personnel for guidance and advice in times of difficulty. Teachers who are highly accessible and willing to connect with students on a personal level have the opportunity to infuse their advice or feedback with components of the school’s character education framework. This allows students to apply the framework to their own experience, and also serves to deepen the students’ connection with the school community. It may not be enough to lead by example; rather, teachers must engage directly with students to learn about their experience and help them apply the character concepts and lessons directly to their lives.

4. Provide explicit instruction around important aspects of the transition to college above and beyond academic issues. Specifically, helps high school students understand the challenges they may face with respect to drugs, alcohol, and other risky behaviors in college. In addition to substance use, college campuses are frequently much more diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of culture. Students need basic information about what to expect in order to avoid surprises and promote more intentional decision-making.

5. In addition to educating students on diversity, find ways to get students into more diverse/heterogeneous settings and then help them process those experiences. Expose students to various aspects of culture (races, religions, food, music, clothing, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, family systems, etc.). Opportunities to engage with peers from different backgrounds helps students expand their awareness and increase their level of acceptance, so avoid settling for videos or speakers alone and work to create experiences where students are forced outside of their comfort zone. These opportunities to exist at “other” should be followed closely by opportunities to process
the experience with faculty, breaking down the experience and working to understand how their experience can increase their empathy and compassion.

Conclusion

The current study described how four college students identify and utilize the character education they received in high school. This study provided a new lens through which to understand character education by giving voice to the students who participated in the programming and activities through qualitative means of data collection and analysis. The findings of this study suggest that these college students largely recognized and appreciated their character education experience that they gained in high school, and were able to identify specific values and concepts that were emphasized either through an explicit curriculum or as part of more broad expectations set forth by the school. Additionally, these students identified high school character education in the efforts made by teachers and other school personnel who served not only as role models, but who also worked to connect with students on a personal level and infuse those connections with character education. To various degrees, these students utilized character education to guide their decision-making process, reflect on their decisions, connect with others, and develop their identity. Increased diversity in the college context shaped how they utilized their experience with high school character education. Students who transition to a college environment that is largely similar to their high school may transfer their character education lessons and utilize those same skills and values in establishing connections and finding success. College students who enter a college environment that is markedly different from their high school environment, specifically with an increasingly diverse student body, may be forced to adapt their skills and values to meet the needs of the new context. Though this task is more challenging initially, the process of adapting skills and the exposure to more diversity may serve
to strengthen identity and broaden worldview. The students in this study who were given time and space to explore, develop, and strengthen aspects of their character, and who were held to clear expectations by the adults within the school, were well-equipped to meet the demands that come with the transition to college including separation from family and friends, identity formation, and forming new connections. By placing individual experiences within the context of a shared phenomenon, this multiple case study illuminated the ways in which students identified and utilized high school character education, and also sets the stage for strengthening future programming.
References


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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please review this information carefully and call or email Jennifer Willis if there is anything you do not understand.

Who is doing this research?
This is a study in counselor education that is being conducted by a doctoral candidate, Jennifer Willis, a student in the counseling program at the University of Cincinnati.

Purpose of the study:
The purpose of this study is to explore how young adults experience the lasting effects of high school character education in the college environment.

Who will be in this research study?
Four college students will participate in this study. You must be 18 or older and must be currently residing in the United States.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
You are invited to participate in an interview as part of this study. You will be asked to respond to questions that address your experience with high school character education programming and your transition to the college environment. The initial interview will take about 60 to 80 minutes to complete. As a follow-up to the interview, the researcher will provide you with the opportunity to review and share feedback during the data analysis stage. A second interview may be requested to review, clarify, or expand upon any topics that were addressed in the initial interview.
Are there any risks to being in this research study?

This study involves minimal risk. If a question makes you uncomfortable you do NOT need to answer it.

Are there any benefits for being in this research study?

Your participation has the potential to provide insight into those aspects of character education that persist in the college environment, and spark consideration for how character education programs may serve students once they leave the high school environment. No individual incentive is offered.

Do you have choices about taking part in this study?

If you do not want to take part in this research study you do not have to.

How will research information be kept confidential?

Information about you will be kept private. Pseudonyms will be used to avoid revealing the identity of participants.

What are your legal rights in this research study?

Nothing in this information form, which is your consent form, waives any legal rights you may have. This information form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability or negligence.

Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?

No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty.

What if you have any questions about this research study?

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study you should contact Jennifer Willis at 207-653-7433 (willisj9@mail.uc.edu).

The UC Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences (IRB-S) reviews all non-
medical research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants is protected. If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the Chairperson of the UC IRB-S at (513) 558-5784. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB-S, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.
Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your high school and what led you to <College Name>.

2. What was character education like at your high school?
   a. Can you describe any specific activities you participated in as part of the character education experience?
   b. Can you describe any of the specific values or concepts that were emphasized as part of the character education experience?
   c. Can you describe the role that teachers and other school personnel played in the character education programming?
      i. (Follow-up on any specific teachers/administrators that are mentioned.)

3. Is there anything else about your experience with high school character education that you would like me to know?

4. Tell me about your transition to the college environment.
   a. Follow-up on any issues related to separation, identity formation, and intimacy.

5. When you consider your experience with high school character education, are there any aspects of that experience that have helped you during the transition to college?
   a. Can you think of times when you have used your experience with high school character education in the college environment?
   b. To what extent has your high school character education impacted your college experience?
      i. Academic achievement/success
      ii. Transition to college
iii. Overall well-being/peer interactions

6. Can you describe some similarities and differences between your high school environment and your college environment?

   a. In what ways have those similarities and differences impacted the ways you might utilize your experience with character education?

7. Is there anything else about your college experience that you would like me to know related to your high school character education?
Table 1
Case-by-Case and Cross-Case Table of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview #1</th>
<th>Interview #2</th>
<th>Interview #3</th>
<th>Interview #4</th>
<th>Cross-Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question #1: How Do College Students Identify High School Character Education?</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Expectations</td>
<td>Guiding Principles</td>
<td>Behavioral Expectations</td>
<td>Behavioral Expectations and Feedback</td>
<td>Explicit Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction and Practice</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Participation and Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>Participation in Community</td>
<td>Faculty Involvement and Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community</td>
<td>Connection with Faculty and Peers</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Question #2: How Do College Students Utilize their High School Character Education?** |
| Creating New Connections | Identity Formation | Transferring Academic and Social Skills | Identity Formation | Independence and Autonomy |
| Identity Formation | Increased Self-Awareness | Establishing Meaningful Connections | Managing Transition | Creating New Connections |
| Transferring Academic Skills | Establishing New Connections | -- | Connecting with Others | -- |

| **Question #3: How Does the College Context Shape the Utilization of Character Education?** |
| Increased Diversity | Differences Compared to the High School Environment | Similarity of Environment Compared to High School | Increased Diversity | Diversity |
| -- | Separation | New Social Climate | -- | -- |