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Guest Notebook

Doesn't character matter anymore?

Premium content from Philadelphia Business Journal by Jason Duckworth


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One hundred and twenty Harvard students are under investigation for cheating. One of our vice presidential candidates speaks with modest reverence for facts. A New Jersey congressman takes an expensive family vacation using campaign dollars and says it's OK because it was approved by his wife, a professor of legal ethics.

There is a growing sense that America's elites have lost their moral compass. From finance to politics to our greatest universities, we are confronted repeatedly with examples of those at the top of the ladder playing unfairly to climb higher. And what makes this especially shocking is that today's elites are the product of what is arguably the most meritocratic system for advancement in American history. As brains replaced birthright in the late 20th century, we were to have inaugurated a more worthy elite.

So what went wrong? Inherent in today's meritocracy is the notion that an individual's intellectual performance matters most. [Paul Tough](#), in his new book, *How Children Succeed*, describes this notion as the "cognitive hypothesis" — the idea that intelligence is the most important factor in a person's success in life. Tough describes compellingly how American education has lost its way by undervaluing the broad range of character traits that contribute to success in life and society, from perseverance and conscientiousness to kindness and generosity. Our obsession with the cultivation and measurement of academic skills and intelligence has encouraged exactly what we've tested for: smart kids who test well but fail at the broader range of character strengths not on the test.

As we've passively watched droves of kids drop scouting and enroll in test prep classes, we may have signaled to our children that personal achievement comes before community norms. If what matters is a high grade on your Harvard take-home exam and not how honorably you earned it, then you have created a system that effectively discourages moral character.

Just as the "cognitive hypothesis" may have undermined character in young people, it could be argued that objective systems for advancement in business have done the same for adults. In the recent years, we've seen scores of bankers knowingly lend money to unqualified homebuyers and yet earn big bonuses. We've watched financiers take gambles that put taxpayers at immense risk and yet retire rich. We have witnessed high-profile journalists be revealed as fabricators or plagiarists. Recent scholarship from UC Berkeley provides disturbing evidence that "the pursuit of self-interest is a more fundamental motive among society's elite, and the increased want associated with greater wealth and status can promote wrongdoing." 

It appears that noble character may be increasingly rare among our nobility.

Our meritocracy needs to broaden its definition of merit and, in doing so, tilt the incentives towards a more holistic concept of character. In the early 20th century, songwriter [Katherine Lee Bates](#) in "America the Beautiful" urged the nation to "confirm thy soul in self-control."

It could be an anthem for the 21st century too.

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