

CASE STUDY

# 4

## **Educating the Whole Person**

Wake Forest University  
Winston-Salem,  
North Carolina

*The great use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts it.*  
~ **William James**

“If you haven’t been to a college campus in the last six years, you don’t understand how radically the atmosphere has changed,” commented New York University psychologist Jonathan Haidt recently. He was speaking in the aftermath of the 2017 attack on Charles Murray at Middlebury College, where a mob of students obstructed Murray’s speech and then violently drove the social scientist off campus, injuring the professor escorting him, and doing property damage in the process. It was a disturbing incident in a series of campus frenzies caught up in a wave of moral ultimatums on the way history should be told, narratives of oppression and victimhood, and a capitulation to the therapeutic as the only way to make sense of truth.

These ultimatums have coincided with an avalanche of gender identity, discrimination, and sexual-assault claims on college campuses, the #MeToo movement, and a renewed reckoning with the nation’s racial sins. Technology and a heightened sense of social pressure have worsened the mental health of our young adults. In all this, one sees a generation coming of age without guide or guardrail, floundering to direct its moral yearnings with maturity, and institutions at a loss as to how to help them.

The results are troubling. Nationwide, 11.5 percent of college students say they contemplated suicide in 2018 (from 6 percent in 2007); 66 percent reported binge drinking in the past two weeks (from 43 percent in 2007); 33 percent are on medication for depression or anxiety (from 20 percent in 2007). As measured on the Diener Flourishing Scale, only 45 percent of college undergraduates were thriving in 2016, according to the Healthy Minds Network survey.

Beneath these foreboding indicators, a foundational question is resurfacing: *What is college education for?* Is it for learning and teaching, or is it for faculty research? Should it be an agent of social mobility, or even social engineering? Is it about training people for the labor market, or is it about forming them into active citizens and mature human beings?

The answers are shifting as the landscape changes. Today, the bulk of jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree increasingly demand “soft” skills like collaboration, empathy, the ability to read a complex situation and deftly navigate its subtler demands. As more jobs are being replaced by automation, there’s a recognition that universities can no longer be sources of information alone; rather, they need to be incubators of relational skills, highly integrative analytical capacities, and agile leadership.

At the same time, students themselves are exhausted by the “achievement” mentality that’s driven many of their upbringings. Rather than it being a bridge between adolescence and adulthood, most

understand college to be yet one more competition for advancement. Too many campuses now are characterized by anxiety and a scramble for status, not the shared quest for truth that's historically grounded the university's telos.

Libraries could be stocked with books explaining the cause of this fraught climate on America's campuses, but at the center is a moral void. The humane lessons offered by great literature and art are less taught and less learned. Ruthless social media and credentialing hierarchies have created artificial expectations and increased peer pressures. Declining religious practice has cut students off from spiritual support. The modern university, laments former Harvard dean Harry Lewis in his book *Excellence Without a Soul*, has forgotten Emerson's conclusion that the honing of the mind can be pernicious if not paired with the development of character.



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Some within academia are trying to correct the course. Organizations like the Hyde Park Institute at the University of Chicago, the Lyceum Fellows at Clemson University, and the Veritas Forum at Ivy League and other top-tier schools aim to offer students deeper modes of inquiry into truth and the moral commitments they will make in life. The Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins and St. Olaf's Institute for Freedom & Community aim to foster the virtues of good citizenship. There are numerous programs that champion the Great Books and the study of history and evolved wisdoms. Most of these start-ups are respectful of religion and tradition, operating as close-knit communities that recognize that deep formation happens best when people are committed to the growth of one another and the pursuit of great ideas and noble action, one day at a time.

Students are flocking. Yale's “Life Worth Living” course now attracts 150 applications for only 40 slots. “Justice” with Harvard's Michael Sandel enrolls 1,115 students. According to a 2016 Veritas Forum student survey, “developing a coherent worldview” is the thing students most want to

accomplish in college. In a recent Dartmouth College spirituality survey, 88 percent of respondents said they were on a “spiritual quest,” and 78 percent said opportunities for spiritual growth are an essential or important part of college.

One school that is responding to these developments with sensitivity and ambition is Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Baptist by denominational heritage and led by the religious historian and former Notre Dame provost Nathan Hatch, Wake is now a top-30 secular institution that places a special emphasis on cultivating the whole person—head, heart, and helping hand—across every facet of the university. The school is intensely humanistic as it innovates on this question: “How do we train leaders not just to make a living, but to live?”

### **People first, programs second**

It begins with the people, starting with President Hatch himself. “Character is the most pressing issue of our day, and one that institutions of higher education struggle to address,” Hatch says. “We can far more easily study and talk about virtue and the good life than actually nurture character in the lives of students.”

Hatch consistently cites Wake’s motto, *Pro Humanitate*, as his animating principle. Translated “For Humanity,” it is an exhortation toward selfless living, reclaiming education as the quest to explore what it is to be human, across time and in particular contexts. “I relish that opportunities abound at Wake Forest for students to serve and to be challenged by the big questions,” Hatch said in his opening university address in 2005. “What can I know? In what can I believe? To what should I be committed?” He has since wrapped just about every possible program—academic and extracurricular—in these questions.

But instead of reforming by-laws, he’s hired people. “It all has to do with the right person,” Hatch is fond of saying. Wake’s career services office was one of the first places he focused on.

Andy Chan was at Stanford’s Business School during the dot-com boom of the 1990s, and remembers how easy it was to get jobs. Yet something about that era seemed unsustainable. He wanted to help students make more thoughtful choices about their work and futures. He read Jim Collins’s *Built to Last* about long-term versus flash-in-the-pan business successes, and began experimenting with ways to transfer that book’s lessons to personal career choices.

“At the time, there wasn’t appetite for a deeper conversation around career and vocation,” Chan recalls. Less than 10 percent of the faculty at Stanford responded to his initiative. Then Chan learned about the Lilly Endowment’s work in fostering opportunities for vocational discernment among college students, and started experimenting. Instead of simply having students take self-diagnostic tests in isolation and then feeding them to recruiters, Chan created a course called Career & Life Vision, and made it a requirement for Stanford’s first-year business students. It exploded.

“Students are in a lot of pain to figure out their way,” Chan says. Beneath the pragmatic choice of this path versus that path, “there are deep questions of who they are.”

President Hatch got wind of Stanford’s course and its success. He wooed Chan to do something similar at Wake Forest. Chan reflects, “At Wake I saw a leader and a school more favorable to integrating personal development with career development. Only the top person—in this case the college president—can ask people to aspire to be their best selves.” Shortly after he arrived, Chan raised \$5 million from 30 families so he could fund new initiatives at Career Services without siphoning money away from Wake’s academic departments.

That was nine years ago. Career Services has since been renamed the Office of Personal and Career Development and has become a standard-bearer for this kind of work. The keystone is a set of “College-to-Career” courses that have Wake students reading psychology, philosophy, and history, and even studying chess, together meant to crystallize their questions about what and who to serve after graduating. There are reinforcing discussions, reflection exercises, experiments, and apprenticeships, many of them taking place within mentoring relationships with faculty or alumni.

Chan is now helping other institutions build their own college-to-career bridge. He emphasizes Wake’s distinctive element of requiring coursework. The seminar element is indispensable to getting students to grapple with the questions of meaning, purpose, and commitment-making that will eventually pervade their lives.

“Most students walk into a career-services office to get something done in 30 minutes. They approach us in fix-it terms: ‘I just want to end this anxiousness.’ And the job of typical college career officers is to get students internships and jobs. Most can’t conceive of adding yet one more task. So you *have* to sit students down in a course. It’s the only way to get them to think about this” from all the angles they’ll need for purposeful lives.

Another one of President Hatch's key hires was Steve Reinemund, former CEO of PepsiCo, who served as dean of Wake Forest's business school from 2008 to 2014. Hatch and Reinemund had known each other for some years through shared service on the national board of Salvation Army. Then Hatch asked the executive to fix serious problems at the business school. "For the most part I believe academics are better suited to lead academic institutions," says Reinemund. "But sometimes tough business decisions are best made by outsiders."

A graduate of the Naval Academy and a longtime trustee at Chick-fil-A and Walmart, Reinemund was as passionate about personal formation as Hatch, and made this the cornerstone of Wake's business education. Arriving right after the national mortgage meltdown, Lehman Brothers collapse, and other failures of the Great Recession, he articulated a new mission for the school: "Developing passionate, ethical business leaders driven to achieve results with integrity." The new curriculum and mentoring scheme emphasized fostering character and principled behavior along with competence. In 2014, Wake shifted away from the traditional, daytime program to serve working professionals in the evenings, becoming the #1 part-time MBA program in North Carolina.

### **Bringing character into new academic departments**

Even before the financial crisis, Reinemund notes, business schools were likelier than other departments of higher education to emphasize the pragmatic importance of character. Almost all b-schools, for instance, provided training in "leadership." But in the last decade, he argues, students have "clamored for questions of character to take a more active role in their business education." He says smart leaders now realize they can't succeed in this area simply by tightening compliance rules. Instead, character training and moral responsibility need to be infused into each aspect of their companies, enchanting the institutional mission itself.

Wake Forest promotes the idea that good character is built through repeated quotidian choices, solidified long before dramatic tests arise. This approach attracted another moral gardener to campus: Michael Lamb. Raised on a small family farm in Tennessee, Lamb earned academic and service scholarships to attend Rhodes College in Memphis, where a particularly profound course entitled "Hunger, Plenty, and Justice" sparked an interest in integrating academic study with community service.

Lamb's college scholarship required ten hours of volunteer labor per week. He initially viewed this as a way of paying his tuition. But, as he reflected in a later essay, "working at soup kitchens, building Habitat houses, and tutoring elementary students transformed how I saw myself and the world. I began to see the difference between *doing community service* and *servicing the community*. Service, I realized, wasn't merely a collection of one-time projects or a way to build a résumé; it was a way of life that pervades all that we are and all that we do."

Lamb went on to become a Rhodes Scholar, Princeton doctoral student, and dean of leadership, service, and character development for the Rhodes Trust at Oxford University. He was recruited to Wake Forest in 2016, where Hatch asked him to build a path-breaking program in character and leadership training. Despite the many "ethics" initiatives at universities today, "few translate that work to the actual formation of student leaders," says Hatch. Given Wake Forest's own history and identity, he hopes its programming could offer a model of how to do this for other colleges and universities." Certainly "there has never been more interest in forming leaders of character, given the crisis of leadership evident in civic life, in the professions, and in business—but almost no one has a real plan for how to do this."

Lamb did have a plan. He and his team at the Oxford Character Project had developed "Ethics Through Fiction and Film" reading groups to help students use novels and films to expand their moral imagination. They organized a "Portraits of Leaderships" tour at the National Portrait Gallery to consider how artists can shape one's vision of leadership. They recruited a jazz professor to help students think about what the genre can teach about leading and following, improvising and collaborating. They invited a Shakespeare scholar to lead a conversation on leadership after viewing *King Lear*. Oxford students had responded hungrily to these kinds of opportunities. They snatched up opportunities to probe the deeper "whys" beneath their rigorous tenure as Rhodes Scholars.

Now Lamb intends to do something similar at Wake Forest. "Often, when we think of 'leaders,' we think of 'heroic' leaders, the one person out in front—the politician, the general, the CEO, the person who holds a position of institutional authority and exercises command and control. These leaders are important, but they are not the only kind of leaders. And they are not the kind of leaders that millennials tend to follow or become.... Therefore, we will focus on developing and teaching new models of everyday leadership."

Most leadership programs focus on teaching students how to run a meeting, delegate authority, or communicate effectively. “These skills are necessary,” says Lamb, “but they’re not sufficient. After all, leaders can use their skills for either good or ill. Our program will teach our students to be not just *effective* leaders, but *ethical* leaders.”

It will emphasize both individual virtues and community contributions. “Many civic engagement programs at other places focus on only community service without explicitly exploring how character shapes community and how community shapes character. We will focus on both.” And all kinds of students will be pulled in. “Much of the recent discourse on leadership has been confined to business or management.... Our liberal arts tradition gives us an opportunity to develop creative programs that expand students’ imagination and supply an urgency to their study of history, literature, philosophy, and the arts.”



Service isn’t merely a collection of one-time projects that build a resume—it’s a way of life that can pervade all that we are and all that we do.

Lamb’s vision is capacious. “My vocation is to teach as many competent citizens as possible,” he says. And he will have help. In 2009, the John Templeton Foundation gave Wake Forest a grant of \$3.7 million to launch a character project that supports Wake’s own internal needs while also funding category-stretching research. Thanks to this and other philanthropic support, Wake Forest has been able to build a reservoir of in-house research on how character develops. Philosophy professor Christian Miller, author of *The Character Gap* and other books, is a nationally recognized authority on the subject. Wake professors Will Fleeson, Mike Furr, and Eranda Jayawickreme are making contributions from psychology. And the university’s Eudaemonia Institute, dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of human flourishing, is run by business ethicist Jim Otteson, one of the world’s leading authorities on the moral teachings of Adam Smith.

“Character includes a wide array of virtues,” says Lamb. “It’s more inclusive than we often think, and it’s intrinsically related to the whole person.... Our relationships, our extending circles of love, are what make us whole.”

### **The broader picture**

Hatch admits that character education inevitably makes faculty nervous. “There are always blockages of, ‘Who’s going to define that?’” Many resist notions of moral hierarchies and preferred behavior, and don’t want a conscious set of values promulgated in their classrooms. “The best way to kill an initiative is to birth it by requirements,” Hatch says. “We’d rather try to do really good things and make them attractive.”

One of the president’s initiatives has been to make Wake Forest’s admissions process interview-dependent. The aim is to attract people who have character and leadership gifts, not just academic credentials. Standardized tests are now optional, and the undergraduate application asks short-answer questions that try to get students to reflect on their priorities and direction. For instance:

- Hashtags trend worldwide. Give us a hashtag you wish were trending. Why?
- Describe yourself as fully and accurately as possible in the 140-character limit of a tweet.
- Choose an unsung historical figure who deserves the *Hamilton* musical treatment.
- Describe an instance in which you observed or exhibited “character.”
- Give us your personal Top-10 list.

Wake has also invested heavily in student well-being, mentoring, and expanded faculty advising. Wake’s THRIVE Initiative encourages practices of mindfulness and play. The Mentoring Resource Center invites public figures like Condoleeza Rice to discuss their life paths with students. It provides mentoring toolkits to departments at the university that want to connect their students to potential guides (like Andy Chan’s office of personal and career development). They train individuals who want to be mentors to have deep conversations with students. They link younger students, older students, new graduates, alumni, and faculty in various small groups to encourage coaching, and affinity discussions.

For all the ways in which Wake has successfully adopted a renewed mission around character, it’s still more of an aspiration than a proven path. The question that keeps Hatch up at night is a tough one: “How to do substantive character formation in a pluralistic context?” Some

students and faculty are suspicious of Hatch's religious roots. Is he trying to impose his convictions? To make Wake a Christian institution?

"I can't impose my personal values on the university," Hatch says honestly. "But I can help shape it." He does feel that character development may be "impossible to do without religious resources," but he's also looking to recast these resources, and his institution's character-building efforts as a whole, in a distinctly pluralistic and forward-looking way.

"Wake Forest's religious heritage, far from being a liability or an embarrassment, offers the opportunity of a holistic education, one that allows students to wrestle with the world's most pressing issues," Hatch says. "We believe we can develop men and women of real character, people who do the right thing because it springs from their chosen commitments and values, not because it's legislated or imposed."

In his book *Education's End: Why Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, Anthony Kronman notes that he has "watched the question of life's meaning lose its status as a subject of organized academic instruction and seen it pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities, where it once occupied a central and honored place."

Hatch and the colleagues he has gathered are restoring status to that question. From the curriculum's core requirements to the prime value placed on teaching, from the ways in which every Wake person you encounter—whether secretary, student, coach, or vice president—walks with a defined sense of belonging to the broader community, to the students' consistent aspiration to live lives defined by skilled competence in the service of civic care and contribution, no aspect of the Wake experience feels utilitarian or for show. Neither does any aspect seem detached from another. The school strives to integrate every strand into one message you can hang a life on, namely, that human beings are ends in themselves.

"I'd always thought of college as a financial tool to get a good job," says Sarah, who graduated with honors in 2017. "Never had I thought about the *why* of what I was doing. Until I came here."

Drew, a rising senior, says, "Here at Wake, you *know* people. You want to help the other out. It's always: 'How are you? And *who* are you?'"

"I think a lot of college presidents would like this," says Hatch. "But they don't know how to do it. Here at Wake Forest, we're driving a car. We as university leaders need to build the road."