

# Academic flourishing and student formation

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**Abstract:** In this paper we put forward various conceptual and empirical proposals for assessing the flourishing of an academic institution and its role in student formation. We consider the breath and variation of various university and college mission and vision statements and their implications for student formation and for what might be considered as reasonable bounds for the scope of an educational institution's contributions to student flourishing. We comment upon and argue for the importance of student and character formation even to attain a university's more cognitive and epistemic goals and ends. We discuss the core purposes of the university beyond student formation and also broader notions of what it means for a college or university to flourish as an academic community. We propose various assessments that might be of use in evaluating such academic flourishing. Finally, we point towards some practical resources that can be used to potentially strengthen student formation and the flourishing of academic institutions and the need for further curation, evaluation, and implementation of such resources to better promote academic flourishing.

**Keywords:** assessment; education; policy; university; well-being; flourishing

## 1. Introduction

Education concerns formation – certainly the formation and shaping of minds, but arguably also, in its broadest sense, the formation of persons (Maritain, 1943; Ortega y Gasset, 1946). Such formation of persons takes place not only through formal educational and academic institutions, but also through families, neighborhoods, religious communities, and through various life experiences. However, the role that formal educational institutions play in student formation can sometimes be profound (Mayhew et al., 2016). For many, these institutions play a primary role in fostering students' cognitive development. However, the formation that occurs within educational institutions can often extend far beyond cognitive and epistemic development (Arthur and Bohlin, 2005; Bok, 2020; Wortham et al., 2021; Brant et al., 2022; Higgins, 2024). Anecdotal accounts abound on the potentially transformative effects that a school, or a college, or a particularly fine or caring teacher can have on the development, the character, and the entire life trajectory of a student. Such experiences are a part of education understood in its broadest sense.

However, academic life also extends beyond student formation. Universities and colleges contribute enormously to the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge, with accompanying benefits to society. Moreover, colleges and universities not only contribute to the lives of students and to broader society but also constitute communities in their own right, with their own sets of relationships and goals and ends. For an academic institution to better attain

those ends and foster student formation, it is important that the academic institution is itself flourishing.

The overarching aim of this paper is to develop a conceptualization of, and assessment approach for, student formation that corresponds to the aspirations often present in college and university mission and vision statements, and to situate this within a broader framework of academic flourishing. The paper is structured as follows. First, we will review a select sample of mission and vision statements of various institutions of higher education, to provide some sense of the scope of, and the variation in, what these institutions aspire to accomplish, both with regard to their function in the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge, but also with respect to student formation. We then turn to the question of the proper scope of the contribution of institutions of higher education to student formation and flourishing, and how visions for this might reasonably vary. However, we further argue for the importance of personal and character formation of students even to attain the more knowledge-oriented goals of higher education. We then broaden the discussion further to consider the purposes of the university that extend beyond student formation and also what it means for an academic institution to flourish as a community. We then discuss possible empirical assessments of academic flourishing, including the individual flourishing of the members of an institution (faculty, staff, and students), the flourishing of the institution as a community, the contributions of the institution to student formation, and offer some discussion of future possible directions concerning additional assessment approaches. We discuss a number of practical approaches and resources that may be of benefit in promoting student formation and academic flourishing. We conclude with some final remarks on the potential for assessments of academic flourishing and of student formation to shape and advance academic life and to re-orient institutions to the grand visions often present in their own mission statements.

## **2. Academic mission and vision statements**

Many colleges and universities around the world have mission or vision statements that aspire not only to the expansion of knowledge, and the development of the cognitive capacities of students, but also to more holistic student formation and to broader societal contributions. We begin by reviewing a sample of mission and vision statements. We present these mission and vision statements and take them at face value. Although we acknowledge that in many or most cases these statements also serve promotional purposes, we do nevertheless believe that the statements constitute important and aspirational ends that many in educational leadership would, and should, embrace.

Stanford University (2025), for example, states:

Our mission is to contribute to the world by educating students for lives of leadership and contribution with integrity; advancing fundamental knowledge and cultivating creativity.

Swarthmore College (2025) has as its mission that:

Swarthmore College provides learners of diverse backgrounds a transformative liberal arts education grounded in rigorous intellectual inquiry and empowers all who share in our community to flourish and contribute to a better world.

The University of Wisconsin Madison (2025) has, as its vision, that it will be:

a preeminent center for discovery, learning, and engagement by opening new forms of access to citizens from every background; creating a welcoming, empowered, and

inclusive community; and preparing current and future generations to live satisfying, useful, and ethical lives.

The mission statement of Harvard College (2025) reads as follows:

The mission of Harvard College is to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society. We do this through our commitment to the transformative power of a liberal arts and sciences education.

As part of its mission, William & Mary (2025) states:

Through close mentoring and collaboration, we inspire lifelong learning, generate new knowledge, and expand understanding. We cultivate creative thinkers, principled leaders, and compassionate global citizens equipped for lives of meaning and distinction.

Many leading universities outside the United States have similarly expansive mission and vision statements. For instance, the mission statement of the Universidad de los Andes (2025) in Bogotá, Colombia, claims that it:

pursues academic excellence and imparts to its students a critical and ethical formation to support them in the consciousness of their social and civic responsibilities, as well as their commitment to the environment (our translation).

The University of Tokyo (2025) proposes that it:

aims to nurture global leaders with a strong sense of public responsibility and a pioneering spirit, possessing both deep specialism and broad knowledge. The University of Tokyo aims to expand the boundaries of human knowledge in partnership with society.

In addition to learning, discovery, advancing knowledge and rigorous intellectual inquiry, these vision and mission statements also suggest aspirations for students and for the broader society of preparation for leadership; cultivation of creativity; contributing to a better world; being enabled to flourish; having integrity; being equipped for lives of meaning and distinction; educating citizen-leaders for our society; becoming compassionate global citizens; and living satisfying, useful, and ethical lives.

Not all university mission statements are quite so expansive, and some have a stronger emphasis on knowledge itself, along with various aspects of its generation, preservation, transmission, and application. While, as above, Harvard College itself has a relatively expansive mission statement, this applies only to the College and its undergraduates, not to the University as a whole, and there appears to be no University-wide vision or mission statement at Harvard other than perhaps the University's motto – *Veritas – Truth*. The mission statement of MIT (2025) is also more strongly focused upon knowledge and scholarship:

The mission of MIT is to advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century. The Institute is committed to generating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge, and to working with others to bring this knowledge to bear on the world's great challenges. MIT is dedicated to providing its students with an education that combines rigorous academic study and the excitement of discovery with the support and intellectual stimulation of a diverse campus community. We seek to develop in each member of the MIT community the ability and passion to work wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind.

The mission statement of University of Michigan (2025) reads:

The mission of the University of Michigan is to serve the people of Michigan and the world through preeminence in creating, communicating, preserving and applying knowledge, art, and academic values, and in developing leaders and citizens who will challenge the present and enrich the future.

And the University of Cambridge (2025) in the United Kingdom describes its mission as follows:

The mission of the University of Cambridge is to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

However, even with these statements, that are more directly focused upon knowledge, there is still often a clear sense of the relevance of that knowledge to the service of society, and also of the need to “form students for the excitement of discovery... to work wisely, creatively and effectively for the betterment of humankind.” Some degree of formation is necessary even for the pursuit, and application, of knowledge.

The range of these vision and mission statements do, however, raise the question of what colleges and universities ought to aspire to and there is arguably room for different specifications of the scope of the educational endeavor of different institutions. There is also sometimes tension between what is articulated in these mission and vision statements with regard to academic institutions serving the public good versus college degrees being treated more as a consumer market, often with student expectations tending to be more instrumental and personal (Chan, 2016). The full range of what academic institutions are ultimately aiming at will almost certainly continue to be heterogeneous across institutions. In the next section, we will lay out an understanding of the scope of the formational endeavor of institutions of higher education, and one that can arguably accommodate the variation in mission and vision statements that can be found in practice. We will, however, also argue for the importance of student formation even to accomplish the knowledge-based aims of colleges and universities. We will then turn to the other purposes of universities that extend beyond student formation and discuss yet broader considerations of what it means for an academic institution to itself flourish as a community.

### **3. The scope of educational institution’s contributions to student flourishing**

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the notion of flourishing as a central aim of education (Brighouse, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009; White, 2011; Wortham et al., 2020; Kristjánsson, 2022; Carr, 2021; Pawelski, 2022; Ellyatt, 2022; VanderWeele, 2022; Stevenson, 2022; de Ruyter et al., 2022; Hand, 2023; Siegel, 2023; Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2025). Flourishing itself might be conceived of as the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good (VanderWeele, 2017; Lomas et al., 2023). Flourishing understood in this manner is multidimensional and constitutes an ideal; it is never fully attained. One may be flourishing in certain ways, but not in others. One may have good relationships, but difficulties with health; or one may be pursuing a noble purpose but at the cost of some loss of financial security. Flourishing pertains to all aspects of life. While it is not possible to enumerate all possible domains of flourishing, and while well-developed conceptions of flourishing will vary across cultures and traditions, it can be helpful consider what is shared, and is what nearly universally valued, including, but not limited to, e.g., happiness, health, meaning, relationships, character, and financial security (VanderWeele, 2017).

Education of course has an important contribution to make in enabling flourishing in many domains of life. Much of the work on education for flourishing has arisen out of consideration of

the nature and function of primary and secondary education, but the debate of course pertains, perhaps in somewhat modified form, to higher education as well. While almost all would embrace a central, even primary, role for formal educational institutions in developing the cognitive capacities of students and in equipping them with knowledge, there is clearly, as noted above, the potential to accomplish more. Part of the impetus for considering student flourishing more broadly may arise from a discontentment with earlier models or understandings of the role of educational systems as focusing solely on knowledge for knowledge's sake, or, in human capital models of education, as focusing principally on equipping students to contribute goods and services to support themselves and society through productive activity (Blaug, 1985; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Gilead, 2012; Marginson, 2019; Ergas et al., 2022; Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2025). Such understandings seem to miss the transformative potential of education, and the opportunities it affords to enable students to flourish more generally.

On the other hand, there are arguably also problems with construing the scope of formal educational institutions too broadly. Schools and universities cannot be held accountable for all aspects of student flourishing, and students are shaped by many other people and non-academic institutions, including their families, their neighborhoods, their religious and other communities, their subsequent workplace and economic opportunities, and so on. There has consequently been some reasonable critique directed at flourishing as an aim of education, on the grounds that it is overbroad, vacuous, too demanding, or impossible to operationalize in a pluralistic context (Carr, 2021; Siegel, 2024; Hand, 2024). If flourishing is to be taken seriously as an aim of education, it is important to more clearly specify what is, and what is not, within the purview of a formal educational institution.

Kristjánsson and VanderWeele (2025) previously proposed the following understanding of the scope of education for flourishing in attempt to find a middle way between an overly broad understanding that is beyond a formal educational system to realize and an overly narrow understanding that does not acknowledge the real potential for formation, contribution, and transformation:

*The scope of the contribution of a formal educational institution to student flourishing can be specified as the developing of students' knowledge, understanding, and the cognitive skills and epistemic virtues that facilitate knowledge and understanding along with the promotion of those aspects of student flourishing around which broad consensus can be attained, and which teachers and educational leaders are prepared to address (Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2025).*

While this was previously put forward for, and in large part motivated by, considerations of education for flourishing pertaining to primary and secondary education, we believe it is of relevance, properly interpreted, in higher education as well. However, as explicated below, what teachers, faculty, and educational leaders are prepared to address may be very different in higher education versus primary or secondary education, and may certainly vary depending on the mission and vision of each particular academic institution.

To unpack this proposed scope of the contributions of a formal educational institution to student flourishing, several comments merit attention. The first part of the proposed scope - *the developing of students' knowledge, understanding, and the cognitive skills and epistemic virtues that facilitate knowledge and understanding* - is arguably relatively uncontroversial. All colleges and universities aim not only to equip students with knowledge, but also to form them to better reason, think, and understand, and to shape their minds, and ideally habits of thought, so that they are better able to also subsequently acquire, interpret, and apply knowledge. These things

are fundamental and central contributions that institutional education makes towards student flourishing, both in the present and the future.

However, all educational institutions can arguably also go beyond this. The second component of the proposed statement is intended to capture these other aspects so as to include: *the promotion of those aspects of student flourishing around which broad consensus can be attained, and which teachers and educational leaders are prepared to address*. This is potentially quite broad, but it is restricted in two ways.

First, it includes not all aspects of student flourishing, but only those around which broad consensus within the relevant community can be attained. Conceptions of flourishing or well-being will vary across cultures, persons, and philosophical or religious traditions. Such understandings may be especially diverse in more pluralistic contexts. The extent to which consensus is attainable will vary by country, culture and context, and of course by institution, and may be greater for say a small religious college, whose primary constituents might all come from a single small denomination, than for a large public university, with a mandate to serve students of all viewpoints. Nevertheless, while well-developed conceptions of flourishing, or of what is good, may vary by culture and person, there will often also be a lot that is shared (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; VanderWeele, 2017). Such consensus arguably includes, amongst other things, happiness, health, meaning, character, social relationships, and financial security (VanderWeele, 2017). Such aspects of flourishing are nearly universally valued across cultures and contexts. Even many aspects of character, which are sometimes thought to vary more substantially by culture, in fact have numerous universal elements (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005) and, as we discuss below, some of these are in fact central for colleges and universities to even accomplish their principal cognitive and epistemic aims.

However, it was also proposed that the scope of educational efforts concerning student flourishing be restricted in a second important way to those aspects of student flourishing *which teachers and educational leaders are prepared to address*. Such preparedness includes both a psychological willingness to engage in student formation or foster student flourishing, and the possession of the skills, capacities, and resources to promote those particular aspects of student well-being. However, such a restriction is arguably also shaped by what the institution itself considers as being included within its mission and vision. We saw notable variation above in how broad the mission statements were of various institutions of higher education, and this second restriction on the readiness or preparedness of institutions to advance aspects of student flourishing will thus often be shaped by the precise nature of the institution's stated mission. Of course, such readiness or preparedness is not static. Mission or vision statements can change with time. Faculty, staff, and educational leaders may be better equipped to facilitate student formation, or student mentorship, or may themselves participate in student extra-curricular formative activities to a lesser or greater extent. Faculty, staff, and educational leaders may implement new programs or curricula to enhance other aspects of student flourishing. With new efforts and programs or further training, readiness and preparedness to address student flourishing can be expanded. While the enhancing student flourishing may also go on to help facilitate attaining the institution's epistemic aims, there are, however, inevitably certain trade-offs with regard to time and resources. It is critical of course that the academic institution not compromise or neglect its role in the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge. It thus may make sense to especially focus in an academic setting on those aspects of formation that are particularly conducive to better facilitating an institution's academic aims. Amongst these are arguably various character strengths and virtues that facilitate learning, dialogue, understanding, and the pursuit of knowledge, and it is to this topic that we now turn.

#### 4. Student formation and the virtues needed for the pursuit of knowledge

Historically, many colleges and universities have viewed character formation as a central aim, and, this is still, as seen above, sometimes reflected in university mission and vision statements. Moreover, as noted above, education, at least in its broadest sense, is ultimately about the formation of persons. This has certainly been the view of many across different cultures from Aristotle (1926: 1104b, p. 79) to the Confucian sage Mencius (2009: 1A3). The Prussian educational reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt, for example, wrote, “The true purpose of a human being...is the highest and most proportional formation (*Bildung*, education) of his powers into one whole” (1851: 9; cf. Herdt, 2019: 114).

Today, however, efforts at character formation are sometimes met with resistance as being extraneous to a university’s primary mission in the generation, preservation and transmission of knowledge, or on the grounds that faculty and staff are ill-equipped for this task, or because conceptions of the virtues vary across cultures or traditions (Colby, 2002; Kiss and Euben, 2010; Carr, 2017; Brant et al., 2022). While reasonable responses can arguably be put forward to these objections (Kiss and Euben, 2010; Brant et al., 2022; Kristjansson, 2021; VanderWeele, 2022), and while differences across cultures have arguably been exaggerated (Dahlsgaard, 2005; VanderWeele, 2022), a further compelling case for focusing on character formation within academic contexts can be made in that certain virtues are in fact essential for the accomplishing the cognitive and epistemic aims of colleges and universities. We provide a brief summary of our argument below, and have provided a fuller development of it elsewhere (Case and VanderWeele, 2025). While the focus in this paper is the contribution that academic institutions might make in the character formation and flourishing of their students, the students themselves of course play a critical role in this also. Students themselves, along with academic institutions and other communities, all together effectively jointly shape a student’s flourishing. However, emphasizing the role that students have in their own formation can often provide a sense of agency and provide motivation to make use of the resources that colleges and universities have to help them develop; part of that development concerns character and virtue.

According to a classic typology that goes back at least to Plato, there are four principal or “cardinal” moral virtues, namely justice, temperance (or moderation), courage (or fortitude), and practical wisdom (or prudence) (Plato, 1969: 427d–434c). Justice, on one ancient and still influential account, disposes its bearers to “render to each what he is due” (Cicero, 1914: 5.65, p. 468; Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.57.1, corp.; Wolterstorff, 2009; Case, 2021: 18-19). Temperance regulates our appetites, so that we desire the right pleasures at the right time and in the right degree (Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.141.1-2). Fortitude equips us to face difficulty or danger without falling into the opposing errors of cowardice or foolhardiness (Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.123.1-2). And practical wisdom – which on some accounts is the virtue at the heart of every virtue and unifying all of them – is the ability to recognize and pursue the good in our concrete and complex circumstances (Aquinas, 1888: ST 2-2.47.1-2; Bohlin, 2022). Each of these, along with finer-grained virtues that specify their application to particular settings, is arguably relevant for many aspects of the generation, preservation and transmission of knowledge.

It often takes significant courage, for example, to speak up in defense of controversial or minority viewpoints in academic settings. Current statistics for universities in the United States indicate that many students and faculty are uncomfortable with or refrain from sharing or defending their beliefs about important social, political, or academic controversies, either in class, or among their peers in social settings (Jones et al., 2024). While the institutional culture and context may sometimes be to blame, in many cases, such self-censorship also arguably constitutes a failure of courage on the part of the students or faculty. In other cases, students have reported

even lying to their peers or professors about what they believe in order to avoid being ostracized or penalized. In such cases, this is not only a failure of courage, but also of honesty, which is arguably at least in part a sub-type of justice (cf. Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.145). To foster a healthier academic culture, universities must learn to encourage greater courage and honesty in students and faculty alike.

A culture of robust academic learning also requires civil discourse, in which people with a variety of views on disputed questions listen to, engage with, and learn from one another. This allows each person to come to a better understanding of the truth, or their own positions, and also that of their opponents (Mill, 1989). To sustain a culture of civil discourse, students and faculty need patience (arguably a sub-type of courage, cf. Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.136.1-2) to bear with arguments they might find disagreeable or even offensive. They need humility (classically, a division of temperance, cf. Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.161.1-2) to realize the limitations of their own knowledge and that they may have something to learn from those who hold different perspectives. Students and faculty need a sense of justice to give each person his or her due within the academic context, to have time and space for each to be heard, to properly engage with each person's ideas, and to respect their dignity as human persons even when there is intense disagreement. The development of the virtues of patience, humility, and justice are thus also essential for an academic community to function as it ought.

In addition to their role in civil discourse, the virtues of patience and humility, along with courage, teachableness or "docility" (Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.49.3), and a proper love of learning or studiousness (cf. Aquinas, 1888: 2-2.166.1-2) are also often needed for acquiring knowledge. Academic pursuits can sometimes require considerable effort, or time, or may be at the boundaries of a student's capacity, or may require them to attend to and rely upon the greater wisdom of their teachers. Moreover, learning requires a willingness to submit one's accomplishments to the assessment and correction of those teachers. Such efforts at learning have, in many contexts, become easier to evade with the advent of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT (Khalil & Er, 2023); the ready availability of these aids in cheating has also underscored the continuing importance of cultivating honesty in students. Patience, humility, docility, studiousness, courage, and honesty are all critical for the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student to take place.

Many of the virtues enumerated above are likewise often required in original research. Research pursuits may sometimes require repeated attempts, and numerous failures, before they are effectively brought to completion, and so researchers need patience to press on in the face of difficulties, and humility to know when to abandon a fruitless line of inquiry. The spate of recent scandals involving gross research misconduct also underscores the importance of honesty for the discovery of new knowledge: whether in the case of psychologists faking data in studies of honesty (Lewis Kraus, 2023) or of oncologists manipulating data across dozens of studies for potential cures for cancer (Mueller, 2024), it is clear that academic research, notwithstanding important institutional checks against individual misbehavior, remains deeply reliant on the fundamental integrity of researchers.

In the context of the selection of research pursuits, and perhaps even course selection, a certain practical wisdom is needed to make decisions as to what pursuits might best advance knowledge, or contribute to society, or foster one's intellectual development. Such practical wisdom also shapes decisions concerning what to read, what to study more assiduously, what to commit to memory, what to share with others and in what contexts, and how knowledge itself might be applied. Practical wisdom is thus of considerable value in the generation, preservation, transmission, and application of knowledge.

Even beyond the personal integrity necessary not to cheat in one's coursework or in one's research, integrity is also important in academic life more broadly. A student's academic vocation can be derailed by foolish or immoral choices, when they are not governed by moderation or temperance. Students are given a great deal of freedom -sometimes for the first time- in college and university settings. Such freedom can itself be an important part of a student's formation. However, such freedom can also arguably be misused, potentially interfering with academic pursuits due to accidents, addiction, strained relationships, or feelings of guilt. At the very least, students should be encouraged to live up to their own moral commitments, and to reflect on what those might be. So too, the academic vocations of faculty can be frustrated by broader failures of integrity: there is now wide agreement, for instance, that faculty who engage in romantic or sexual relationships with students abuse their position of authority and compromise their ability to offer objective instruction and assessment. Broad personal integrity is thus itself likewise important in academic life.

For an academic community to flourish, certain virtues are, moreover, required not only students and faculty, but also of university leaders and administrators. Academic leaders need practical wisdom to know how to appropriately structure academic life, policies, events, and orientation sessions, in order foster academic pursuits and student formation. They need the virtue of justice to ensure that each member of the community is properly respected in his or her pursuit of truth, and treated fairly, and given the opportunity to put forward reasoned arguments. They need courage to stand up to unreasonable demands made by students, faculty, or others that may suppress the free exchange of ideas or the pursuit of knowledge. They will often need patience and temperance to rightly bear with the challenges that come with educational leadership. They will need a studiousness to more fully understand the various aspects of university life in the context of decision-making, a humility in putting the good of the community above their own, and a patience to work through the various perspectives on different issues within academic life. They also need honesty and integrity to hold fast to prior commitments essential to university life and to establish trust within the academic community. Such considerations of practical wisdom, justice, courage, patience, temperance, humility, honesty, and integrity should arguably inform selection committees in their deliberations concerning leadership positions. Moreover, the importance of these virtues for academic leaders also constitute yet another argument for undergraduate and graduate student character formation. Some of these students will ultimately become the college and university leaders of the next generation. Their own formation at present will subsequently shape the future life of colleges and universities when they themselves assume positions of leadership. The various virtues discussed above and their role in academic life and educational leadership are summarized in Table 1.

Student character formation within universities is thus important not only in its own right, but also because universities will ultimately be impeded in their mission of the generation, preservation and transmission of knowledge if they do not inculcate the virtues needed for academic pursuits. Inadequate focus on student formation can profoundly adversely affect campus life (Lewis, 2007; Kronman, 2007; Deresiewicz, 2014). Indeed, in recent years, many colleges and universities have arguably not only failed to instill these essential virtues in their students, but have, if only unintentionally, fostered the opposing vices of impatience, irresolution, intolerance, and irrational pride (Haidt and Lukianoff, 2018). We need further efforts to foster character formation, and we will return to potential resources and approaches to do so in subsequent sections.

**Table 1. Virtues for the pursuit of knowledge and academic life**

<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Role in Academic Life</b>	<b>Role for Educational Leaders</b>
Courage	Being willing to express controversial viewpoints	Being willing to rightly stand up to threats to the academic community
Patience	Bearing with arguments one may find disagreeable or offensive; persisting with difficult endeavors	Working through all of the various perspectives within academic life
Justice	Allowing each person to speak; respecting each person's dignity	Ensuring each person is treated fairly
Honesty	Being forthright about one's actual views; not cheating in academic work or research	Establishing trust within the community
Humility	Realizing one has something to learn from others; understanding the limitations of one's knowledge	Putting the good of the academic community above one's own
Studiosness	Being committed to acquiring knowledge	Working to more fully understand university life in the context of decision-making
Temperance	Not allowing foolish choices to derail study	Rightly enduring the challenges of educational leadership
Practical Wisdom	Deciding what is valuable to study	Structuring academic life for the benefit of the community

In these previous two sections, our focus has been on the scope of potential contributions of academic life in institutions of higher education to the formation, and present and future flourishing, of students. In later sections we will consider assessments of such formative contributions to student development, and also some resources and practical approaches that might be used to carry out such formative activity. But the mission of colleges and universities generally extends beyond the education and formation of students and concerns also the generation, preservation, transmission, and application of knowledge (Kalven Committee, 1967; Duderstadt, 1997; Sandford et al., 2007; Pitt, 2011; Dzisah and Etzkowitz, 2012). Many of the mission and vision statements considered above pointed toward the central role of knowledge in the life of a university. The faculty themselves of course have a central role in this task. In the next section we will situate the present discussion within broader notions of “academic flourishing” and what it might mean for a college or university, and all its members, to be flourishing as an academic community.

### **5. Academic flourishing and the purposes of the university**

There has been considerable discussion as to the purpose of the university (Oretga y Gasset, 1946; Goheen, 1969; Boulton and Lucas, 2011; Collini, 2012; Whittington, 2021) and also as to the aims of higher education (Rosovsky, 1990; Barnett, 2004; Lagemann and Lewis, 2015; Chan, 2016; Bok, 2020). As noted above, one common rendering of the purpose of the university is often stated along the lines of the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge (Kalven Committee, 1967; Duderstadt, 1997; Sandford et al., 2007; Pitt, 2011; Dzisah and Etzkowitz, 2012; University of Michigan, 2025; MIT, 2025). Such articulations were given, quite explicitly, for example, in the mission statements of MIT and of the University of Michigan above. Depending

on the specific formulation, “generation” is sometimes replaced by “creation” (Duderstadt, 1997; Pitt, 2011; Michigan, 2025), “production” (Dzisah and Etzkowitz, 2012; Whittington, 2018), or “discovery” (Kalven Committee, 1967; Gray, 2004); “preservation” by “conservation” (Kelley and Sharif, 2005) or “curation” (Galea, 2023); and “transmission” by “dissemination” (Whittington, 2018; Kalven Report, 1967; MIT, 2025) or “communication” (Gray, 2004; University of Michigan, 2025). Sometimes along with the generation, preservation, and transmission “of knowledge” is the addition “and of culture,” or particular aspects of culture (University of Michigan, 2025), though it is arguably *knowledge* of culture that is the specific focus of the university. Sometimes omitted from these formulations is the notion of the “preservation” of knowledge, with only its generation and dissemination explicitly articulated (Whittington, 2018; Fan and Beh, 2024). However, colleges and universities devote considerable resources to the preservation of knowledge through the publication of articles and books, through their library systems, in educating subsequent generations of scholars, and in passing on previously established knowledge. Sometimes appended to “generation, preservation, and transmission” of knowledge is also the “application” of knowledge (Duderstadt, 1997; University of Michigan, 2025). However, “transmission” itself might arguably be seen as inclusive of application as well. In the context of higher education, the “transmission” of knowledge might thus ultimately be understood in its broadest sense, which would include the teaching of knowledge to students, the dissemination of knowledge to colleagues and to the general public, and the application of that knowledge to society and its challenges.

As noted above, many colleges and universities also embrace an aim of broader student formation, and some such formation is necessary, at least as a means to support the pursuit of knowledge. Both the formation of students and also the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge will also undoubtedly contribute to society, and to addressing its challenges, in numerous ways (Goheen, 1969; Arthur and Bohlin, 2005; Boulton and Lucas, 2011; Collini, 2012; Lagemann and Lewis, 2015; Chan, 2016; Daniels et al., 2021), which many colleges and universities likewise embrace as part of their mission and vision statements, though the extent to which this is articulated does vary. Bringing these ideas together one might thus say that *the core mission of a university is (i) the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge, which in turn generally entails (ii) the formation of students as a necessary means, and (iii) contributions to society as a natural consequence*, though the extent to which these latter two objectives are explicitly articulated and intentionally pursued as principal aims will vary across institutions.<sup>1</sup> In any case, each of these constitutes an important function of the university.

However, the life of a college or university extends beyond the question of its attaining these aims and purposes. This is in part because a college or university also constitutes a community, with people in it. It is thus worthwhile considering not only whether an institution of higher learning is attaining its ends in the pursuit of knowledge, but also whether the institution itself is flourishing as a community, and whether its members are flourishing. Ideally, we should aim at colleges and universities being well-functioning communities that are successful in attaining their principal ends but that are also good communities in and of themselves, with flourishing individuals, good relationships, proficient leadership, healthy structures and practices, a sense

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<sup>1</sup>.By way of contrast, liberal arts colleges might especially emphasize the preservation and transmission of knowledge, with varying degrees of emphasis on its generation. We would thus suggest that the core mission of a liberal arts college might be stated as: (i) the formation of students and the preservation and transmission of knowledge which generally has both (ii) the generation of knowledge and (iii) contributions to society as natural consequences, though the extent to which these latter two objectives are explicitly articulated and intentionally pursued as principal aims will vary across institutions.

of belonging and welcome, and a shared mission. Attaining that common mission is part of, but not the whole of, what makes a good academic community. Motivated by these considerations, we will introduce a notion of “academic flourishing.”

We might define academic flourishing as *the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of an academic community’s life are good* (cf. VanderWeele and Lomas, 2023). This is of course an ideal and one that is never perfectly attained. Such “academic flourishing” is also multidimensional: it pertains to all aspects of an academic community’s life and some aspects of the community’s life will inevitably be better than others. Such a notion is also exceedingly broad – it will never be possible to fully enumerate all aspects of an institution’s life or to evaluate the extent to which they are proceeding in a good or satisfactory manner. It can nevertheless be helpful to consider some of the major components of an academic community’s life, and in a subsequent section we will also propose approaches for the empirical assessment of some of these aspects of “academic flourishing.”

First, for an academic community to flourish, its members – faculty, staff, and students – should arguably themselves be flourishing to some degree, and particularly in their capacity in and roles as members of that academic community. It would be odd to say an academic community was flourishing when its members are not doing well. Academic flourishing then in part involves, to some degree, the question of whether its various members are happy, healthy, have a sense of meaning, are of good character, have good relationships, have a sense of financial security, and are flourishing in other ways. Certainly, not all of this is within the purview or power of an academic institution to ensure. A person’s life is affected by numerous other things beyond their place of study or employment. Nevertheless, there are many ways in which members of an academic community can support and enable one another to flourish, and in which formal institutional structures can help also. It is arguably in the interest of leadership to support, when possible, the flourishing of the members of the community. Severe problems in life can also of course detract from the academic pursuits of individuals and of the community as a whole. In any case, the flourishing of individuals is a part, though only a part, of “academic flourishing.”

However, for an academic institution to flourish, there should also be a sense that the community is flourishing *as a community*. The community in some sense has a life of its own (cf. Case, 2021: 105-108; Wolterstorff, 2012: 56; Scruton, 1989), and one can then consider what it means for a community to flourish in ways that extend beyond the flourishing of its members. We would argue that academic flourishing in this irreducible, corporate sense includes, amongst other things, good relationships, proficient leadership, healthy structures and practices, belonging and welcome, and a common mission. For an academic community to be flourishing as a community, it should be knitted together by strong and healthy relationships, characterized by trust, respect, mutual concern, support, and accountability. Such relationships are not only valuable in their own right, but can foster collaboration, civil discourse, institution-building, and mentorship. Within an academic community, these relationships are valuable both intrinsically and instrumentally. As noted above, for an academic community to be flourishing as a community there should also be proficient leadership – leadership that cares about the community and its members, that can be relied on to do what is right, that has the skills and understanding to lead the university well, and that can inspire the university with their vision. A flourishing academic community also needs healthy structures and practices in place that sustain the life of the community, that enable it to better carry out its academic work, and that allow for the resolution of conflicts and disagreements. Perhaps most fundamentally, for an academic community to be flourishing as a community there should be a sense of a shared

common mission in the cognitive and personal formation of students and in the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge. Such common mission should be made clear repeatedly and this itself can help the each member of the academic community to see his or her own role in that mission, and how each person is needed, and together able to do more than would be possible for each individually, and how the carrying out of this common mission might ultimately help make important contributions to the world as well. Good relationships, proficient leadership, healthy structures and practices, and a common mission can together all better give rise to a sense of belonging, of satisfaction with the community, of welcome and deeper integration, and that the community is thus good to be a part of.

While a college's or university's role in the generation, preservation and transmission of knowledge and in student formation are critical, the very fact that institutions of higher learning are themselves communities points towards the need for greater attentiveness to those aspects of academic life that potentially extend beyond the pursuit of knowledge. It is in principle conceivable that one might have a university which is contributing substantially towards knowledge but in which most of the members of the university are miserable, or in which the structures, leadership, and relationships are dysfunctional. Such a university would be fulfilling its principal purposes, but would not constitute an instance of "academic flourishing" because the community itself, and its members, are not doing well. Such communal flourishing considerations are important in their own right. However, it is also the case that these other aspects of academic flourishing, if going well, will also facilitate the pursuit of knowledge. Flourishing individuals, good relationships, proficient leadership, healthy structures and practices, and a sense of belonging can all potentially empower the generation, preservation and transmission of knowledge.

Such notions of academic flourishing are of course ideals and will never be perfectly attained. However, it can be valuable to reflect upon what is going well within a community, and among its various members, and what is not. While impressions and reflection can be helpful in this regard, so also can survey assessments of the members of the community. In the next section we will consider potential survey assessments that might be used to partially evaluate some of these aspects of academic flourishing and student formation.

## **6. Assessments for academic flourishing and student formation**

A comprehensive assessment of academic flourishing would require both objective and subjective metrics. Such assessments are always partial as it is not possible to capture all aspects of the life of an academic institution. Nevertheless, as noted above, certain aspects of academic flourishing are central to any reasonable assessment: Are students, staff, and faculty flourishing as individuals? Is the college or university flourishing as a community? Are students being formed in their cognitive capacities and in their understanding and knowledge, and even more broadly as persons? We will consider potential assessments below for individual flourishing, for the flourishing of the institution as a community, and for student formation. We will also offer some further remarks on future developments that may be desirable for assessing the academic flourishing of an institution more comprehensively.

We will begin with the flourishing of the individual members of an academic community. There is no unique manner in which to assess the flourishing of individuals. Numerous assessments of well-being are available (Diener et al., 1985; Ryff, 1989; Huppert and So, 2013; Su et al., 2014; VanderWeele, 2017). What is used may depend on the particular desired emphasis of the assessment and also the time and space (e.g. number of questions) available for such assessments (VanderWeele et al., 2020). However, if an assessment of individual flourishing is

desired, with an intended scope of trying to cover fairly broadly “all aspects of a person’s life” then the nature of the range of questions asked should likewise be fairly broad. We have proposed elsewhere (VanderWeele, 2017) a 12-item assessment with two items each covering the following six domains: happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial security. For completeness these are included in the Appendix (cf. Węziak-Białowolska et al. (2019ab) for psychometric properties) and could in principle be employed with faculty, staff, and students to gain some understanding of how each group is doing and what the strengths and weaknesses of the institution might be in each of these six domains, and who may need help and in what ways. This particular assessment has been used with several million respondents to date and nationally representative benchmarking is available in 22 different countries (VanderWeele et al., 2025). However, this particular assessment could certainly be substituted for other well-being assessments.

In addition to assessing the individual flourishing of the members of an academic community, it can also be helpful to carry out assessments on whether an academic institution is flourishing as a community. As with individual flourishing, there is no unique way in which to carry this out. In prior work (VanderWeele, 2019) we have proposed a general community well-being assessment that has respondents evaluate whether they see a particular community flourishing as a community. Such communal well-being includes, but extends beyond, the flourishing of the individual members of the community. Beyond the individual flourishing of the community’s members, the assessment has respondents report on communal well-being in five different domains: good relationships, proficient leadership, structures and practices to sustain the community, a sense of belonging and welcome, and a common mission. Respondents are not asked about their own experience specifically, but are rather asked to provide their own evaluations of how all the various members of the community might perceive the community as flourishing, or not, within these various domains. Four items are used in each of the five aforementioned domains and, for completeness, this assessment is also provided in the Appendix (cf. Padgett et al. (2024) for psychometric properties). However, once again, this assessment could be replaced by other types of community well-being assessments depending on the survey space available and the priorities of the institution. Such assessments can give insights into the relative strengths, and weaknesses, of an academic institution, both across the various domains and in relation to other academic institutions. Such assessments could also be supplemented by other more objective measures such as financial sustainability; staff, faculty, and student retention; job placement; alumni relations; and so forth.

The individual flourishing and the community well-being assessments proposed above are relatively general in nature and were not specifically developed with a principal focus on educational settings. An argument might be made that an academic well-being assessment should be specifically shaped for educational contexts. While there may be advantages to this, much of the existing literature on student well-being assessment focuses principally on mental health rather than positive well-being (Dodd et al., 2021; Nair, 2018), though some more positive student well-being assessments in higher education have been proposed (Renshaw et al., 2016; Brocato et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021). However, an alternative view to student-tailored assessments is that there is arguably value in using more generic well-being assessments that are used in, and are applicable to, other contexts, which can be useful both for purposes of comparability and benchmarking. This might be especially important if, for example, one were to continue to track the well-being of alumni following graduation. The proposed assessment approach in this paper thus uses more generic well-being measures for individual flourishing and for college/university community well-being, but then also uses an additional set of

questions concerning student formation to help evaluate what is distinctive to educational contexts. These student formation questions can also be used to help assess the growth of students during their time at college and university.

Let us then turn to potential assessments of student formation. We will focus here on a proposed assessment for how students perceive the college or university contributing to their own formation and will later then point to potential directions for future development concerning faculty life and the generation, preservation and broader transmission of knowledge.

With regard to student formation, we noted above how it might be reasonable for different institutions to have varying degrees of aspiration as to how they might be contributing towards student formation and student flourishing. However, we also noted how even accomplishing the more explicitly knowledge-related aims of education itself required some degree of student and faculty formation with regard to capacities to listen and engage, to speak honestly and openly, and to have sufficient focus to pursue knowledge. In light of these considerations, we are proposing four, arguably increasingly broad, categories of student formation assessments that may be of varying degrees of importance depending upon the institution's vision for student formation.

The first of these categories corresponds to the classical "intellectual virtues" (Aquinas, 1888: 1-2.57) and concerns the development of the cognitive and epistemic capacities of the students. These would arguably be of interest to any institution of higher education. The second category concerns what we have described above as moral virtues that, in various ways, help facilitate the pursuit of knowledge, including, for example, honesty, courage, moral integrity, a love of learning, and some degree of wisdom and justice. These are valuable in their own right, but, as argued above, are also needed for the academic institution to effectively accomplish even its more knowledge-based aims. Such virtues are arguably also of value to students subsequently, in their contributions to broader society, and this then also brings us to our third category: citizenship and societal contribution (the classical tradition treated these traits under the rubric of the "civic" or "political virtues," cf. Aquinas, 1888: 1-2.61.5). Many of the mission and vision statements reviewed above pointed towards the contribution of knowledge and of student formation towards making the world better. While this third set of questions does effectively presuppose this broader vision of the role of university life and of education, these questions will arguably also be of interest to many institutions. The fourth set of questions concerns the contribution of the academic institution to the student's flourishing and formation yet more broadly. These might be of interest to a number, but perhaps not all, institutions of higher education. Some may view such contributions as extending well beyond the proper purview of a university. However, even in such cases, often extra-curricular life can help facilitate, or hinder, student flourishing in various ways and thus may be worthwhile assessing even if educational leaders do not take such formation as part of their own responsibility. This fourth category includes matters such as finding meaning, appreciating beauty, having good relationships, living in a healthy manner, being assisted in attaining one's life goals, and flourishing more broadly.

The assessment below has six questions in each of these four domains (see Table 2). Students are asked to evaluate the extent to which university life (which may include both formal and informal activities) has helped them to grow or develop academically and as a person. Importantly, the students are not being asked to report on their actual attainment or development in each of these areas, but whether they think university life has assisted them. Thus, with these formative academic contribution questions, they are not being asked whether they have a love of learning, or whether they have developed courage or justice, but rather whether university life has helped them to do so. Such a framing may partially help mitigate self-report biases. This

approach could also arguably help to distinguish a university's contribution to students' moral formation from the contributions of their families, friends, religious communities, and other influences. Such an approach may also help university leadership to understand the nature of the student body, and how students perceive the college or university contributing, or not, and in what ways.

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**Table 2. Student formation assessment**

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**Cognitive and Epistemic Capacities:**

To what extent has university life helped you to increase your knowledge?

To what extent has university life helped you to think clearly?

To what extent has university life helped you to pursue truth?

To what extent has university life helped you to recognize when you are in error so as to be able to change your understanding?

To what extent has university life helped you understand perspectives different from your own?

To what extent has university life helped you learn how to express yourself well?

**Virtues for Academic Flourishing:**

To what extent has university life helped you to become more honest?

To what extent has university life helped you to develop courage?

To what extent has university life helped you to have a love of learning?

To what extent has university life helped you to become more wise?

To what extent has university life helped you to become more just?

To what extent has university life helped you to better lead a moral life?

**Citizenship and Societal Contribution:**

To what extent has university life helped you develop character strengths in order to make meaningful contributions to society?

To what extent has university life helped you understand what you can contribute to your country?

To what extent has university life helped equip you to positively change the world?

To what extent has university life helped you to treat everyone respectfully?

To what extent has university life helped you in creative problem solving when working with others?

To what extent has university life helped you to work with people with diverse political and religious beliefs?

**Meaning and Growth:**

To what extent has university life helped you to find meaning in life?

To what extent has university life helped you to appreciate beauty?

To what extent has university life helped you to flourish as a person?

To what extent has university life helped you to pursue your goals?

To what extent has university life helped you learn how to live your life in a healthy way?

To what extent has university life helped you learn how to have good relationships with others?

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Each of the questions below was evaluated and revised through cognitive interviews with students at Harvard University, University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill, and Campus Bio Medico University of Rome. More extensive campus-wide data collection has been carried

out at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and is underway at other institutions. The questions below are intended as an inventory, rather than as a scale. Questions even within the same domain could elicit very different types of mean responses from students, depending on the nature of the institution and its particular focus and priorities. We would thus suggest reporting separately on each question. However, in some contexts, it may make sense to summarize results e.g. by demographic groups, averaging across the various item responses within a domain as a sort of index. From an earlier version of the questions, with responses collected from a sample of 1,787 undergraduates at UNC Chapel Hill, the reliability for the mean of all questions together, as assessed by Cronbach's alpha, is 0.96 and analogous reliabilities for the cognitive, virtues, citizenship, and meaning/growth domains are 0.89, 0.89, 0.88 and 0.89, respectively. Work is currently underway in evaluating the psychometric properties of these assessments at numerous diverse institutions.

Each of the questions below might be prefaced with the following text: "The next several questions will ask about different ways that university life, both inside and outside the classroom, may have helped you to grow academically and as a person. Please respond to the following questions on a scale from 0-10 where: 0=Has Not Helped and 10=Has Helped a Lot." The phrase "university life" might be replaced by "college life" or by making reference to the institution e.g. "life at Stanford", "life at the University of Michigan" etc.

These questions may be of interest in assessing student perceptions of contribution of university life to their own academic and personal formation. As with other assessments, collecting data on these various questions might allow an institution to assess its relative strengths, and weakness, both across the domains and aspects of student formation, and also in comparison with other institutions. Such data collection might help in understanding which groups are doing well and which may be struggling more and where additional outreach efforts may be needed. They may also be helpful in tracking across the four years of college life say, how student formation is taking place, what is improving and what might not be, and when critical transitions often take place. Even more ambitiously, academic institutions might consider administering the flourishing and character items to alumni, to gauge to what extent their graduates both flourish in adulthood (relative to the nation as a whole), and the extent to which their perceptions of the university's contribution to their personal formation endures even after they embark on a career, marriage, raising children, and the other hallmarks of adult life. All of this can help a college or university understand various aspects of student formation.

With regard to potential benchmarking data, a subset of these questions were also recently included in the Wall Street Journal's survey of U.S. College and Universities and such benchmarking data is available for these four questions on over 500 institutions (Brooks et al., 2024). These four questions are as follows (two from the virtues for academic flourishing domain and two from the citizenship domain):<sup>2</sup>

To what extent has university life helped you to become more wise?

To what extent has university life helped you to become more just?

To what extent has university life helped equip you to positively change the world?

To what extent has university life helped you develop character strengths in order to make meaningful contributions to society?

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<sup>2</sup> The first three of these questions were asked verbatim as reported here; the fourth was asked in the form of agreement with the statement, "At my university, I am encouraged to develop character strengths that will help me make a meaningful contribution to society" [0=Strongly disagree, 10=Strongly agree].

In campus-wide surveys that might be designed for other purposes, and for which academic flourishing is not the focus, these four questions, if also included, might go some way towards a very basic assessment of the formative academic contributions of the institution to student development. For benchmarking purposes, the average of the mean response on each these four questions across the 429 institutions with at least 50 participants was, respectively, 7.76, 7.38, 7.86, and 7.77. These four questions of course constitute only a very partial assessment, but do at least touch upon what are arguably some of the central aspects of such formation.

While the uses of such academic flourishing assessments are potentially numerous, care must also be taken to avoid mis-use. In particular, because these are self-report survey assessments, such assessments should in general be avoided in high-stakes settings. Rewarding teachers or students, or departments or schools, for particularly high scores creates incentives to misreport and the value of such survey assessments falls apart. However, such misuses do not preclude numerous helpful uses, ranging from tracking changes over time, to identifying groups that may need help, to even evaluating interventions (randomized or non-randomized) on how these affect various aspects of student flourishing and formation, and also the flourishing of faculty, staff, and the institution as a whole.

The assessments above concern either the flourishing of individuals, or of the college or university as a community, or the contribution of university life to student formation. However, as noted above, academic life and academic flourishing also concerns the broader contribution of the institution to knowledge and of that knowledge to society. Future work could thus consider other assessments for faculty and university leadership concerning perceived contributions of the institution to the generation, preservation, transmission, and application of knowledge, along with perceptions say of each individual faculty member of their own contributions to generation, preservation, transmission, and application of knowledge, and whether the conditions of university life have helped to facilitate this. On this latter point, it may be of interest, for example, to assess whether and the extent to which faculty believe they have the adequate time, financial resources, opportunities for discussion and collaboration, suitable library and journal resources, and so forth, to enable their work. A holistic assessment of academic flourishing would include not only the flourishing of the community's members, the flourishing of the college or university as a community, and the formation of students, but also the contributions of university life to enabling the generation, preservation, transmission, and application of knowledge.

## **7. Practical resources and approaches**

Further research is needed to curate and evaluate resources and curricula that might promote student formation and student flourishing, or the flourishing of an institution itself. Models, curricula, programs and interventions have been developed and used with some seeming success, but the current state of knowledge can make it difficult to discern the comparative effectiveness of different approaches. Nevertheless, in this section, we point to several resources and models that are available, though we acknowledge that in some cases more work is needed to establish that these are clearly evidence-based resources and recommendations. We will focus here principally on resources for student and character formation. Resources for general well-being promotion are of course yet broader still, and might include, amongst other things, evidence-based well-being promotion activities such as gratitude exercises, acts of kindness activities, imagining one's best possible self-reflection, mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral activities, and others (Bolier et al., 2013; Seligman, 2015; Hendriks et al., 2020; VanderWeele, 2020; Worsley et al., 2022). Such activities could be incorporated within orientation sessions or e.g. an

annual well-being week. However, again our focus here will be on resources for student and character formation.

As for models for character and student formation, the Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues has put forward a framework for Character Education in Universities (Jubilee/Oxford, 2020) covering intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues, the cultivation of character, and various suggestions for practice. Lamb et al. (2021a) and Brant et al. (2022) have put forward a more activity-oriented framework with seven strategies for character development in higher education including: (1) habituation through practice, (2) reflection on personal experience, (3) engagement with virtuous exemplars, (4) dialogue that increases virtue literacy, (5) awareness of situational variables, (6) moral reminders, and (7) friendships of mutual accountability. They also discuss evidence concerning the efficacy of these various strategies and provide examples of implementation.

With regard to specific curricula and practices, Wake Forest University some years ago instituted widespread efforts to include further material on character formation into their curriculum, including formal courses in different schools specifically devoted to questions of character and virtue (cf. Lamb et al., 2021b). Their Program for Leadership and Character has posted numerous resources from the work at Wake Forest that could potentially be adapted to other contexts (<https://leadershipandcharacter.wfu.edu/resources/>) and their Educating Character Initiative (<https://leadershipandcharacter.wfu.edu/eci/>) supports other colleges and universities in their own character education programming. The Oxford Character Project at the University of Oxford, along with its Global Leadership Initiative, provides another model of a project, more focused on voluntary extra-curricular individual character formation, that could likewise also be potentially replicated at other universities (Brooks et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2021a). Other university-relevant character-related resources concern developing capacities to carry out civic discourse with those who hold differing viewpoints, and navigating matters of freedom of expression respectfully within academic contexts, and such resources could likewise help with student formation specifically as regards citizenship (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021; Longo, 2023). There are also educational leadership programs and coalitions specifically devoted providing resources for and convenings around fostering character formation and student wellbeing, such as the Aspen-Kern Program for Leadership and Character in Higher Education or the Coalition on Transformative Education (White et al., 2024).

In addition to specific programs and curricula, there are also various character-related interventions that have been developed and evaluated in randomized trials that could be implemented as part of voluntary extra-curricular or orientation programming. Such character-related interventions include those developed to promote gratitude (Davis et al., 2016; Cregg and Cheavens, 2020), kindness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Curry et al., 2018), forgiveness (Wade et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2024), compassion (Kirby et al., 2017), patience (Alan and Ertac, 2018), and perseverance/grit (Alan et al., 2019). Evidence from individual randomized trials, or in several cases, meta-analyses of randomized trials, suggest effects of these character interventions not only on character assessments themselves, but also on happiness, sleep, and physical health (Davis et al., 2016; Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Kirby et al., 2017; Curry et al., 2017), depression and anxiety (Wade et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017; Cregg and Cheavens, 2020; Ho et al., 2024), hope (Wade et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2024), educational test scores (Alan et al., 2019) and general flourishing (Ho et al., 2024). Such activities, interventions, and resources could once again be offered for voluntary participation in campus-wide campaigns or more focused wellbeing week type efforts.

For institutions and institutional leaders specifically interested in survey-based assessment of academic flourishing and student formation, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University has also initiated a Flourishing Data Collaborative (<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/academicflourishing>) to assist with this work. The Flourishing Data Collaborative was designed to carry out campus-wide academic flourishing surveys, including the use of the instruments above for individual flourishing, university community well-being, and student formation, and provides campus-specific reports to understand the strengths and areas for growth of an institution, how such metrics vary across demographic groups, and how student experiences change over the years of college life. The Collaborative will also offer educational leaders opportunities for convening to discuss and interpret the results and consider programming and best practices to promote student formation and academic flourishing.

As noted above, considerable work remains to be done to rigorously evaluate the effects of various curricula, programming, interventions, and campaigns. However, beginning to collect data on student formation and various aspects of student, staff, faculty, and community flourishing could considerably assist in this task.

## **8. Conclusion**

In this paper we have discussed various notions of academic flourishing - of an academic community flourishing in all aspects of its life, from the flourishing of its various members to its flourishing as a community with good relationships, leadership, structures, sense of belonging, and a common mission. We have discussed mission and vision statements of colleges and universities and how these often point not just to the generation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge but also to student formation and broader societal contributions. However, if college and universities are to take these mission and vision statements seriously then it is also important to carry out assessment and evaluation. We have proposed empirical survey assessments that may assist in this task. These assessments may help unveil the strengths and weaknesses of a college or university, along with which groups are doing well and which are struggling and who needs help, how things are changing over time, and what the typical trajectory of a student's (or faculty or staff member's) life looks like over the course of their university or college experience. Such assessments may help reorient colleges and universities back towards the aspirations in their mission and vision statements. Understanding these matters is important in its own right, but can also help inform policies, programs, decision-making, and interventions, and we have pointed towards a handful of resources that may also be helpful in this regard.

Such assessments can thus be valuable in a range of contexts. While potential mis-uses in high-stakes settings must be avoided, these potential misuses do not preclude numerous helpful uses, once again ranging from tracking changes over time, to identifying groups that may need help, to even evaluating interventions in their effects on various aspects of student flourishing and formation, along with the flourishing of faculty, staff, and the institution as a whole. What we measure shapes what we discuss, what we know, what we aim for, and the policies put in place to achieve those aims. Better assessments of academic flourishing and student formation may help better achieve the profound aspirations of so many of our colleges' and universities' mission and vision statements and ultimately help bring about both greater academic flourishing and greater societal flourishing.

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Tyler J. VanderWeele and Brendan W. Case both conceptualized the content of the paper. Tyler J. VanderWeele draft the manuscript and Brendan W. Case provided critical review and editing.

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Tyler VanderWeele reports consulting fees from Gloo Inc., along with shared revenue received by Harvard University in its license agreement with Gloo according to the University IP policy. Tyler VanderWeele and Brendan Case also help oversee the Flourishing Data Collaborative at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

**Data availability statement**

Requests to access the data utilized in this study can be directed to Brendan Case but will require permission from the Provost's Office of the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

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## Appendix

The individual flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017) and university community well-being assessments (VanderWeele, 2019)<sup>3</sup> are under a creative commons license and are free to use for non-commercial purposes, without permission, provided proper citation is given.

### A1. Individual Flourishing Questions

Please respond to the following questions on a scale from 0 to 10:

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?  
0 = Not Satisfied at All, 10 = Completely Satisfied
2. In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel?  
0 = Extremely Unhappy, 10 = Extremely Happy
3. In general, how would you rate your physical health?  
0 = Poor, 10 = Excellent
4. How would you rate your overall mental health?  
0 = Poor, 10 = Excellent
5. Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?  
0 = Not at All Worthwhile, 10 = Completely Worthwhile
6. I understand my purpose in life.  
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree
7. I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations.  
0 = Not True of Me, 10 = Completely True of Me
8. I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later.  
0 = Not True of Me, 10 = Completely True of Me
9. I am content with my friendships and relationships.  
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree
10. My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be.  
0 = Strongly Disagree, 10 = Strongly Agree
11. How often do you worry about being able to meet normal monthly living expenses?  
0 = Worry All of the Time, 10 = Do Not Ever Worry
12. How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing?  
0 = Worry All of the Time, 10 = Do Not Ever Worry

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<sup>3</sup> See Węziak-Białowolska et al. (2019a, b) and Padgett et al. (2024) respectively for psychometric properties.

## **A2. University Community Well-Being Questions**

For each statement below, on a scale from 0-10, please indicate the extent to which you agree that your college or university is relatively meeting the ideal of community well-being that is being described where: 0=Strongly Disagree and 10=Strongly Agree.

### **Good Relationships:**

- Everyone has close relationships within the university
- Everyone is respected within the university
- Everyone in the university trusts one another
- Everyone contributes to the well-being of others in the university

### **Proficient Leadership:**

- Those in leadership truly care about the well-being of everyone in the university
- Those in leadership can be relied on to do what is right
- Those in leadership have the skills and understanding they need to lead the university well
- Those in leadership are able to inspire the university with their vision

### **Healthy Practices:**

- There are structures and practices in the university that allow relationships to become closer
- There are structures and practices in place that allow the university to deal with conflicts so that everyone is treated fairly
- The university has structures and practices so as to be able to sustain itself
- The university has structures and practices that allow it to accomplish its goals

### **Satisfying Community:**

- Everyone is satisfied with the way things are in our university
- Everyone thinks that this university is a good community to be a part of
- Each person has a sense of belonging in the university
- There is a sense of welcome in the university so that it is possible for each person to become more integrated over time

### **Strong Mission:**

- Our university's shared purpose or mission is clear to everyone
- Our university contributes to the world to make it a better place
- Everyone is needed for the university to fulfil its goals and purposes
- Our university is able to do more with everyone together than we could individually