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Developing virtue-based leadership education: The Leaders of Character Program at Francisco de Vitoria University (Spain)

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents educational insights into the *Leaders of Character Program*, a new leadership initiative based on virtue and character education developed at Francisco de Vitoria University (Spain). Inspired by global movements in virtue and character education and by extra-curricular initiatives in higher education—such as The Oxford Leadership Initiative and the Program for Leadership and Character—the *Leaders of Character Program* aims to foster personal growth and student flourishing, empowering participants to have a more significant and transformative impact on society. The first part of the paper explores the leadership model on which the program is based, its affective or emotional educational salience, and the typology of virtues that underpin it. The second part outlines the development of the program, describing its sessions and the educational methodology employed.

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Introduction

A growing emphasis on a more holistic and socially engaged understanding of higher education is increasingly becoming a defining element of university missions worldwide. Universities are more and more committed to fostering students' development well-being, and overall flourishing (Archer & Schuetze, 2019; Colby et al., 2003; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2020; Kiss & Euben, 2010).

This renewed commitment to supporting students' comprehensive development is not a new idea; it is often associated with the very idea of the university itself (Bok, 2020; Kimball, 1986; Reuben, 1996). However, due to various historical, cultural, and economic factors, this dimension of the university mission has often been relegated to the background, failing to acquire a more central role (Kiss & Euben, 2010).

For instance, after World War II in the UK, higher education policy was oriented to produce professionals demanded by the need for British industry to remain competitive in the global economy, such as engineers, scientists, and managers with advanced technical skills and managerial expertise. As a result, the commitment to holistic student

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development, including moral education or the arts and humanities—was weakened, though not entirely forgotten (Brooks et al., 2022). In the United States, during the same period, concerns over global threats to democracy led universities to renew their efforts to educate students as democratic citizens, sparking a revival of moral education (Reuben, 2022).

Amid this renewed awareness of the university's formative role, virtue and character education are gaining prominence in higher education as tools to unlock students' potential and enhance their contribution to the common good (Arthur & Bohlin, 2005; Brant et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2019). Leading universities around the world are advancing research on character and virtue while developing programs grounded in character education.

Notable examples of such initiatives include the *Oxford Leadership Initiative* developed by the *Oxford Character Project* (Brant et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2019), and the *Program for Leadership and Character* at Wake Forest University (Lamb & Townsend, 2024; Lamb et al., 2021b). In the United States, these current efforts to promote virtue and character in higher education settings are preceded by different earlier initiatives, such as the Jon Dalton Institute for College Student Values, the Journal of College and Character, the Wendt Character Initiative at the University of Dubuque, or the teacher training developed at the Mary Lou Fulton Teacher's College at Arizona State University. Also concerns about character formation were promoted by student associations like NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators). Similarly, in the UK—particularly at the University of Oxford—there is a longstanding tradition of highlighting the university's moral purpose in shaping students' character, even before the establishment of the aforementioned Oxford Leadership Initiative (Brooks et al., 2024).

All these programs share the belief that fostering the development of virtue and character in universities supports the holistic formation students require, while also preparing them to navigate the complexities of today's societies.

Within this context, a new virtue- and character-based leadership program has been implemented at Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (UFV, Spain), developed in collaboration with the Oxford Character Project: the *Leaders of Character Program* (LCP). The program also seeks to advance virtue and character education more broadly within Spanish higher education.

This paper explores the educational insights of the LCP. The first section discusses the program's virtue ethics foundation, focusing on the leadership model it adopts, the typology of virtues it promotes, and its emotional or affective educational significance. The second section presents the development of the program, describing its various sessions and the educational methodology used.

The virtue ethics-based educational insights of the LCP

In addition to being strongly inspired by the aforementioned virtue and character education programs, the LCP incorporates certain educational insights that give it a distinctive identity and reflect some original developments. This section explores those unique features of the program, which arise from the specific nature of virtue and leadership education, as well as from the adaptation of global virtue and character

education initiatives to the particular context of UFV. While some of these educational elements may not be entirely new when considered in isolation, their combined articulation—grounded in the natural coherence of a virtue-based educational perspective—contributes to the program's uniqueness.

A virtue-ethics-based model of leadership

At its core, the LCP is built upon a clearly defined virtue- and character-based model of leadership: Leadership of Positive Action (LPA) (López González et al., 2023). This model resonates with the LCP both in foundational and educational terms. According to the LPA, leadership is ultimately understood as the act of guiding others toward a shared or common good. Exercising leadership involves a range of capacities—cognitive, technical, and moral—including virtues, which are defined as 'inner dispositions that enable one to act well' (López González et al., 2023, p. 3). While each virtue facilitates appropriate action within a specific moral domain—focusing on the good relevant to that context—leadership, in this view, facilitates appropriate action aimed at the common good. Thus, leadership is conceived as a virtue or character trait that enhances the human capacity to pursue shared moral goals and the common good. Through the integration of leadership with virtue and character development, the LPA frames leadership as a guiding disposition oriented toward the good of the community. This dual foundational and educational alignment with the LPA shapes the leadership framework adopted by the LCP.

Two foundational aspects of the LPA are particularly influential within the LCP. First, in line with other virtue- and character-based leadership models, the LPA maintains that the development of virtue and character provides an ethical core to leadership (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Newstead et al., 2020). The LPA offers a robust leadership framework that allows for a substantive relationship with virtue–one where virtue is not treated as merely instrumental or as an add-on aimed at increasing effectiveness. Concerns about mere cohabitation or shallow integration of virtue and leadership often arise with models that are considered lacking in virtue ethics (Sousa & Dierendonck, 2017). In contrast, the LPA positions leadership itself as an autonomous virtue construct. This is the central foundational reason for its resonance in the LCP. Seeing leadership as a virtue implies that virtue is intrinsic to the very performance of leadership, not merely an adjunct to it (Newstead et al., 2020, p. 611).

Second, the LPA is integrative with other leadership models. For example, the Servant Leadership model emphasizes the growth and well-being of others—both individuals and communities—as the primary concern of leadership practice. It highlights virtues such as integrity, humility, courage, and empathy, and focuses on the continual cultivation and embodiment of virtuous character (Greenleaf, 1977). Prioritization of others' needs inherently requires the presence of specific virtues. For this reason, Servant Leadership, especially in proposals that specify which virtues are most relevant, has increasingly been developed on a virtue-ethics foundation (Lanctot & Irving, 2010), as exemplified by the LPA.

The principal foundational appeal of the LPA lies in its categorization of leadership as a virtue construct. This perspective moves beyond viewing leadership as merely involving an addition of virtues, or a set of skills supplemented by virtues. Rather, it sees leadership

as the cultivation of a character trait that enables individuals to guide others toward common goals and shared moral goods. Consistently, virtuous leadership development is the excel of this capacity for shared moral goods achievement. This model grants leadership a unique status, akin to that of a meta-virtue. Although not always explicitly framed in this way, the LPA treats leadership similarly to how contemporary virtue ethicists define meta-virtues: traits that guide and coordinate other virtues across various domains of life (Snow, 2019). Meta-virtues are those that adjudicate between and integrate other virtues, thereby enabling effective and coherent virtuous action (Kristjánsson et al., 2021). For example, integrity is often considered a meta-virtue (Kristjánsson, 2019), and *phronesis* is paradigmatically so, as it orchestrates and governs the exercise of other virtues (Kristjánsson et al., 2021). Crucially, meta-virtues—or the possession of them—allow individuals to apply their virtues beyond their original or primary contexts (Morton, 2004).

The *meta-status* of leadership, as conceptualized in the program, shapes its educational foundation and practice by framing leadership as more than a simple aggregation of individual virtues (e.g., practical wisdom, honesty, patience, discipline, moderation). Conceived as a virtue construct with meta-status, leadership demands the appropriate application and integration of virtues specific to its domain: guiding others toward shared goals. It goes beyond the isolated exercise of individual virtues, requiring a coherent and purpose-driven alignment of virtues tailored to the demands of achieving collective objectives. Thus, virtue-conceived leadership represents the harmonious orchestration of virtues within a specific domain of practice.

This conceptualization reflects the distinct nature and performance of leadership. Virtues often associated with leadership—such as resilience, self-regulation, and humility—are essential for effective leadership, yet they manifest differently and assume unique forms within the leadership context. For example, resilience in leadership involves fostering team cohesion to achieve goals, which differs from resilience in personal adversity, such as coping with the loss of a loved one. Similarly, humility in everyday life may involve recognizing personal limitations, whereas in leadership, it emphasizes recognizing and elevating others' strengths.

Thus, although virtues are not exclusive to leadership roles, their expression within the leadership domain acquires a unique character, shaped by the responsibilities of guiding and inspiring others. This perspective emphasizes the integrated and context-sensitive nature of virtue-based leadership.

This conceptualization, foundational to the program, has significant educational implications. Since the performance of virtues in leadership differs from their expression in other domains, their education requires domain-specific pedagogical approaches. As a virtue and character education initiative, the LCP takes into account the particular contexts in which virtues are enacted, including leadership, and designs educational experiences accordingly. This nuanced approach stems from the program's view of leadership as a distinct virtue construct, requiring context-aware cultivation of character traits.

From an educational standpoint, the LPA not only provides a leadership education model specifically tailored to university students but also offers strong conceptual coherence with the LCP. Furthermore, it supports both curricular and extracurricular implementation in the Spanish higher education context, where the program is situated.

This adaptability is reflected in the inclusive integration of virtues and competencies within the LPA model. While they share certain features, competencies—especially those classified as personal—are conceptualized as valid promoters of virtue and character development. They contribute to flourishing by fostering informed, value-driven know-how (López González et al., 2023). Thus, although the model maintains a clear distinction between virtues and competencies, it remains compatible with the dominant discourse of competency-based education in Spain (Fernández & López, 2024). The LPA, therefore, is both context-sensitive and readily adaptable to the Spanish educational environment.

Additional educational advantages arise from the unique leadership construct developed by the LPA, as previously described. Since the LPA includes a specific measurement tool (López González et al., 2024), it enables the assessment of the LCP in terms of both the leadership construct as well as the individual virtues. However, this paper does not present the empirical findings of the program and does not describe its evaluation in detail. When evaluating both the leadership construct and the specific virtues, the intent is not to redundantly assess the virtues encompassed within the leadership model in isolation. Rather, the evaluation aligns with the LPA framework, which understands leadership as the exercise of a specific constellation of virtues within the leadership domain. The LCP is thus both a leadership program and a virtue and character education program. Since specific virtues manifest differently within the leadership domain, the program's evaluation consistently addresses both the leadership model, and the particular virtues involved.

Emotional education

Virtue ethics is frequently recognized as championing emotional education (Kristjánsson, 2018a). It is often regarded as 'a sentimental education' (Macintyre, 1981, p. 189). Indeed, Aristotle repeatedly affirms throughout his ethical writings that ethical virtue is a disposition toward appropriate practical reasoning, action, and emotion within a specific sphere (2004, 1103b 4-17; 1107b 9-23). Therefore, cultivating virtue entails experiencing emotions in ways conducive to moral development (Sherman, 1989, p. 166). Although not all virtues are equally clear or explicit in this regard, most enable and dispose individuals to experience their corresponding emotions virtuously (Curzer, 1996). The acquisition of virtue, then, involves learning to feel appropriately. For example, a courageous person, when facing danger, experiences the proper degree of fear and confidence—directed at the right objects, in the right measure, and for the right duration. Fostering appropriate emotional dispositions, such as fear and confidence, leads to the virtue of bravery. The same principle applies to other emotions.[1]

Although the emotional dimension of virtue is well-established in research, its role is sometimes overlooked in practice and within virtue and character education programs. While there has been a rise in initiatives dedicated solely to emotional education, even prominent virtue and character education programs often do not explicitly address the affective components of virtue. For instance, the *Global Leadership Initiative* (Oxford Character Project) and the *Program for Leadership and Character* at Wake Forest University do not place explicit emphasis on the constitutive emotional strand of virtue. Nonetheless, emotions are inherently present, as virtues cannot exist—or be cultivated—apart from their corresponding emotional dimensions, as previously established (Brooks

et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2021b). In recognition of this, the LCP highlights the connection between the specific virtues it fosters and their associated emotions.

This emphasis on emotional education addresses several key concerns. First, some emotional education initiatives isolate emotions from other human faculties, overlooking the need for an integrated approach that considers all sources of moral behavior (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024). Character education naturally meets this holistic demand by emphasizing the interplay among the psychic faculties involved in moral action, rooted in their ontological interconnectedness (Corcilius, 2015). From this perspective, emotions are educated in relation to other faculties, rather than in isolation.

Second, emotional education aligns with the developmental needs of emerging adulthood—a life stage marked by significant emotional change and the need to develop emotional competence (Arnett, 2000). This stage, second only to infancy in terms of growth and transformation, involves complex personal, social, and emotional development (D. Wood et al., 2018), making emotional education particularly relevant for university students.

Grounded in the nature of virtue, the LCP assumes that character education—because it inherently involves emotions—is more effective when it explicitly nurtures emotional dynamism and recognizes the role of emotions in action. Accordingly, the program integrates the development of virtues with their related emotional experiences, aiming to offer a more complete and holistic education in virtue.

The program incorporates two key strategies. First, each virtue is studied in conjunction with its associated emotions. Second, beyond the general character education strategies discussed by Lamb et al. (2021a; see Section 2), the program adopts three emotional education strategies to foster virtuous emotions: emotional interpretation, emotional appraisal, and emotional orientation (Malo, 1999; see Section 2). These sequential strategies aim to ethically integrate emotions into moral life, promoting emotional literacy and reflective practice so that emotions align with virtuous action. Drawing on virtue ethics (Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024), these strategies emphasize the *phronetic* integration of emotions, the moral structuring of virtue components, and the habituation required to cultivate virtuous action. In turn, as virtue and emotional character education often underpin models such as *service learning/habituation*, *ethos modification*, or *emotion contagion* to varying degrees, the strategies can also draw on elements from a variety of contemporary approaches to emotional education (Kristjánsson, 2018a, pp. 177–179).

Different types of virtues

The LCP incorporates the individualized development of specific virtues. The program acknowledges well-established distinctions among virtues—embracing, for instance, intellectual, moral, civic, and performative strengths—all of which are commonly nurtured and integrated, either explicitly or implicitly, in virtue and character education initiatives. At the same time, the LCP is grounded in its own virtue framework,[2] which further distinguishes subsets of virtues in line with the virtue ethics-based moral psychology that underpins the program.

Some of the additional virtue distinctions introduced in the program are not intended as novel categorizations. Some of them are reflected in existing classifications found

within the broader literature on virtue ethics, though broadening its conceptual foundation. More importantly, their inclusion in the program serves to facilitate distinctions that enhance the precision and effectiveness of the educational experience. In this section, we elaborate on the virtue typology used in the LCP and present the categories of virtues the program encompasses.

It is well established among virtue ethicists to distinguish between different types of virtues—a practice expanded further by the revival of virtue ethics (Upton, 2014). Perhaps the most prominent division is between intellectual and moral virtues, a distinction developed by Aristotle. Moral virtues are acquired, stable character traits that enable us to act rightly in specific moral domains, situations, or experiences that require a moral response (Aristotle, 2004, 1103a 15-18; 1106a–b). A virtue's domain is its moral area of concern—for example, gratitude involves feeling and expressing thankfulness in appropriate ways, and resilience pertains to enduring and recovering from setbacks. To be virtuous is to be well-disposed within these domains (Swanton, 2016). Intellectual virtues are traits that help us to reason, discern, and judge well in matters related to action and the pursuit of knowledge (Zagzebski, 1996).

Aristotle's distinction is grounded in the development of different psychic faculties that support virtuous actions. Virtues represent morally excellent ways of acting that rely on the proper exercise of these human faculties. Aristotle associates intellectual virtues with the refinement of rational powers, while moral virtues relate to the training of the emotions, appetites, and desires (2004, 1102b 31; 1105b 29-1106a 13). For instance, practical wisdom (*phrōnesis*), an intellectual virtue, develops practical reasoning about what to do, which differs from theoretical reasoning (Aristotle, 2004, 1139a 15-16; 1143b 15-16).

From this perspective, virtues promote moral unity within the human psyche by harmonizing its fundamental faculties and capacities (Corcilius, 2015). Virtue and character education aim to cultivate this integrated moral development, highlighting the ontological interconnectedness and dynamic interaction of human powers. As Vogler (2018) notes, 'virtues foster coordination and cooperation among our various powers to pursue human good' (p. 85).

When considering virtue typology, several important factors come into play. First, virtue classification is plural and distinguishes among various kinds of virtues. While we cannot address each in detail here, some well-known distinctions in the literature include: the cardinal virtues – first proposed by Plato in *The Republic* (2004, IV, 426–435), and further developed in the Christian tradition – ; self-regarding vs. other-regarding virtues (Von Wright, 1993); and distinctions based on criteria such as positive action (*doing*) versus refrainment (forbearance), or the attachments certain virtues entail (e.g., benevolence, unselfishness, generosity, respect) (Carr, 1984/1985). Virtues can also be classified as global or local, depending on the range of situations in which they are relevant (Upton, 2014).

Second, virtue proliferation is a concern for some virtue ethicists. While expanding the list of virtues can help guide action in emerging domains (e.g., digital life, bioethics) and across different life contexts (Snow, 2019), it can also lead to the so-called 'enumeration problem.' This issue arises when an unrestricted proliferation of virtues makes it difficult to list or define them clearly, thereby undermining their capacity to guide right actions (Russell, 2009).

Third, determining the best basis for distinguishing virtues remains an open question. Should we categorize virtues based on the domains in which they are exercised, or according to the human faculties they develop? Both approaches offer valuable insights. The domain-based approach helps clarify virtue expression and educational application, while the faculty-based approach captures the underlying psychological mechanisms involved in virtue performance—allowing for a cross-domain understanding. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive and can be used complementarily. In practice, virtue classification depends on the chosen framework. While faculty-based classification may offer a broader account, domain-based classification may be more directly useful in virtue education.

Nevertheless, any attempt to classify virtues remains complex and potentially contentious. It often depends on pragmatic considerations, and the potential for overlap among virtues must be acknowledged (Swanton, 2016). Thus, flexibility is essential when engaging in virtue typology.

A more detailed theoretical discussion on virtue classification lies beyond the scope of this paper. Focusing on the program's virtue typology, it is designed to reinforce virtue educational acquisition. With pedagogical considerations in mind, it aims to offer a more practical and impactful educational approach. Since many virtues represent nuanced responses to specific moral domains (Swanton, 2016), narrowing the focus to these domains enhances the effectiveness of virtue formation.

Furthermore, in addition to the educational benefits of distinguishing virtues by domain, and consistent with the psychology of faculties underpinning virtues, their development varies depending on the human powers they cultivate. Different types of habituation are required for different virtues. For instance, habituating intellectual capacities, such as reflection for *phronesis* development, differs from habituating affections, such as those tied to moral virtues. Habituating hope, for example, entails learning to virtuously experience fear about future outcomes. Since virtues are interdependent (Aristotle, 2004, 1141a 1-3), the development of one virtue supports and necessitates the cultivation of others. The LCP reflects this understanding by recognizing both faculty-based and domain-based virtue distinctions and emphasizing, as N. E. Snow (2016, p. 137) recommends, a focus 'on the habits needed in each paradigm of virtue acquisition.'

Incorporating different types of virtues and their interconnected habituation illuminates the moral growth model that virtue promotes. This model is grounded in developmentalism, which the program intends to emphasize in its educational design. While this paper does not seek to resolve whether virtue is best conceptualized as a threshold (Swanton, 2003), a *satis* or *model* concept (Russell, 2009, pp. 119ff), as aspirational (Curzer, 2023), or as scalar (Kristjánsson et al., 2021), all of these frameworks arguably capture the dynamic and developmental nature of virtue and moral formation. They each reflect a view of virtue as something that grows progressively and appropriately in line with the kind of being we are (Kraut, 2007; Swanton, 2016). Consequently, virtue education, as emphasized in the LCP, must be aligned with the particular characteristics of human moral development.

Such features include the inevitability of moral failure, the steady progression through life stages (e.g., maturity, aging), and the individualization of virtue development (Kristjánsson et al., 2021). Virtue and character education must accommodate the

diversity of individuals, acknowledging that people acquire virtues to different degrees and become virtuous differently (Chen, 2012). This emphasis on individualization is particularly highlighted in the sessions dedicated to virtues such as *phrōnesis* and humility (see Sessions and Methodology).

Having outlined the rationale for these distinctions, we now turn to the specific types of virtues that the LCP seeks to develop. These include well-established categories such as intellectual, moral, and performative strengths. Central virtues in the program include *phrōnesis*, temperance, gratitude, and resilience (see Sessions and Methodology). In addition, the program incorporates other virtues grouped under more specialized categories, which will be discussed hereunder.

Relational virtues

The LCP emphasizes the essential sociability of virtue, a theme central to many virtue and character education frameworks. These frameworks support numerous virtue education initiatives that highlight the social dimension of virtue by introducing specific categories of virtues to make this dimension educationally salient —or, in some cases, by giving it exclusive focus (Stallings & Cobb, 2024). A clear example of this is the attention given to civic or political virtues, defined as 'positive and stable character traits that enable citizens to participate in the public life of their communities' (Peterson et al., 2021, p. 7). Deeply rooted in virtue ethics, civic virtues—such as citizenship, service, and solidarity—reflect the inherent sociability of human beings and the necessity of social life for flourishing (Aristotle, 2017, I. 2, 1252a 24-1243a 3). In this spirit, the program incorporates education in civic virtues such as service, as well as closely related virtues like gratitude.

The LCP further extends its focus on civic virtues by emphasizing the broader role of human relationships in character development, encompassing both social and political communities. This relational emphasis—longstanding within virtue ethics, from Aristotle's reflections on friendship to considerations of political community—leads the program to identify a specific subset of 'relational virtues.' These virtues respond to the normative demands present in different kinds of relationships, from intimate and familiar to wider social contexts (Um, 2021). Because each type of relationship involves distinct moral expectations—whether in friendships, families, organizations, or civic life—and because similar virtues can be expressed in different ways depending on context, relational virtues enable individuals to flourish as participants in these varied relational settings (Um, 2021, p. 96). The program uses the term 'relational virtues' to encompass more than just civic or political interactions. It includes all relationships arising from human sociability—familial, interpersonal, and societal. This approach aims to cultivate the virtues most relevant to developing human relational capacities.

The inclusion of relational virtues in the LCP aligns with the moral psychology underpinning its virtue framework. These virtues stem from the human capacity for sociability, which is developmental in nature. Just as other virtues shape specific human faculties, relational virtues develop the capacity to build and sustain the types of relationships that sociability makes possible. Moreover, emphasizing relationality reinforces the ethical insight that individual flourishing is deeply connected to the

flourishing of others. As ultrasocial beings, humans shape one another's lives and identities through dimensions such as attachment, cooperation, social norms, and collective identity (Fowers, 2015).

Relational virtues, as a category, are closely related to other virtue classifications such as 'virtues of attachment' (Cox & Lott, 2021) or 'other-regarding virtues' (Carr, 1984/1985; Von Wright, 1993). However, the LCP's approach carries distinct nuances.[3] Examples of relational virtues include generosity, gratitude, service, kindness, care, solidarity, and leadership—a fundamentally relational act that transcends the self and engages others.

The LCP integrates this subset of virtues by dedicating two sessions specifically to service and gratitude, both of which possess strong relational dimensions. By focusing on relational virtues, the program seeks to foster the habits and practices necessary for cultivating virtuous relationships of all kinds. These virtues are especially relevant to the developmental stage of emerging adulthood—a life phase marked by the formation of enduring, cross-domain commitments (Arnett, 2000).

Transcendent virtues

The LCP includes a subset of virtues referred to as *transcendent virtues*. Their inclusion responds to several concerns regarding both the philosophical foundations of virtue ethics and the practical demands of character education. Addressing this category of virtues and their integration into the program requires first examining how transcendence, its experience, and some of its meaningful traits are understood.

Transcendence is generally characterized as an awareness of being part of something greater than oneself—whether a community, humanity, nature, the universe, or the Divine (Cloninger & Cloninger, 2022, p. 205). While not limited to religious or theological contexts,[4] this concept speaks to the human capacity for interconnectedness with the broader reality, including other people. It is a receptivity to the world that is intimately associated with the search for meaning. Anthropologically, transcendence is rooted in the essential openness of the human condition, which manifests through various faculties—ranging from the physical to the cognitive—and enables meaningful engagement with the world (Johnson, 1999).

Transcendence often draws attention to the inherent incompleteness of the human condition. It is experienced as a drive or disposition to go beyond oneself—a striving to exceed personal limits, whether in knowledge, relationships, or moral development—and is thus integral to flourishing (Cottingham, 2012). Transcendent experiences suggest that life is more than a sequence of unrelated events; instead, it is part of a larger, meaningful whole (Cottingham, 2012, p. 6). Such experiences may be expressed through cosmological, aesthetic, or moral dimensions, often sparked by encounters with beauty, truth, or goodness.

Importantly, transcendence is not limited to extraordinary or peak moments. It also includes everyday experiences that offer new perspectives on ordinary life, imbuing them with renewed significance and meaning (Cottingham, 2012, p. 6; Snow, 2018). In this way, transcendence is not only present in profound life episodes but also in the ordinary and gradual process of moral formation. This is consistent with the view of moral development in virtue ethics, in which

transformation occurs not only through sudden epiphanies but also through 'cultivation and completion without radical breaks,' as emphasized in general accounts of disposition acquisition (Culbreth & Jimenez, 2023, p. 23).

Accordingly, the self-transcendence involved in *transcendent virtues* is understood as the development of a particular orientation and receptivity to meaning in the world. The program intentionally includes virtues that promote and nurture this kind of transcendent experience—such as hope. In ethical terms, meaning is associated with goods that contribute to a flourishing life. Thus, self-transcendence involves an orientation toward self-transcendent goods (Snow, 2018, p. 40). Certain virtues make this orientation more explicit than others; hope is particularly notable for its role in sustaining meaning in the face of adversity. This form of hope—sometimes referred to as 'fundamental' or 'existential'—is closely linked to the capacity to endure loss and to rise above circumstances that threaten one's sense of significance (Snow, 2018, p. 39). Other virtues that may similarly convey this transcendental quality include love and, in certain cases, faith.

Within the LCP, a session is specifically dedicated to hope. This session emphasizes the virtue's role in sustaining virtuous living amidst uncertainty, helping individuals confront the unknown present and future with openness. The program seeks to foster the right habituation of hope and related virtues—such as patience, confidence, and open-mindedness—so that individuals may develop the capacity to interpret their life circumstances meaningfully (Snow, 2018, p. 59).

Like other categories of virtue, transcendent virtues correspond to the development of particular human faculties. In this case, they cultivate our self-transcending capacities—especially in their relational expressions—, those faculties most capable of orienting human beings toward higher degrees of openness. Thus, transcendent virtues are fully consistent with the moral psychology that informs the program's theoretical framework. They actualize the human potential for openness to greater realities, enabling a virtuous response to experiences of transcendence. While all virtues may, to some extent, involve transcendence, certain virtues—such as hope—bring this dimension to the fore, making it more explicit and central.

The inclusion of transcendent virtues in the LCP also aligns with educational theories that place flourishing at the heart of education. Transcendence is recognized in frameworks such as positive psychology and positive education as one of six core virtues that promote human well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It also features other moral education developments, including post-Kohlbergian (Kristjánsson, 2018b, p. 20). Importantly, these developments—like the LCP—do not impose a theistic or theological understanding of transcendence, but rather adopt an inclusive posture that remains open to such interpretations. More broadly, transcendence is now widely regarded as essential to flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2020). Empirical research supports the central role of transcendence in well-being, confirming its relevance to human flourishing (Levenson et al., 2005).

Moreover, a growing 'transcendent urge', a desire for peak or meaning-rich experiences, is increasingly acknowledged in virtue and character education. Including aesthetic and spiritual capacities is relevant for realizing students' full human potential and for cultivating a deeper, more meaningful vision of what it means to flourish (Kristjánsson, 2018b, 2023).

Professional virtues

The LCP incorporates *professional virtues*, virtues specific to various professional practices that naturally emerge within those domains. Different professions foster distinct sets of virtues: for example, physicians are called to cultivate care, compassion, beneficence, truthfulness, and courage (Pellegrino, 2002), while lawyers are expected to embody justice, loyalty, fidelity, and truthfulness (Longan et al., 2019).

The inclusion of professional virtues in the program is tailored to the specific faculties at UFV. In Law, justice is emphasized as a central virtue; in Communication, veracity and integrity are prioritized; and in Medicine, virtues such as care and kindness take precedence. Additionally, cross-disciplinary virtues like practical wisdom are included.

Grounded in both professionalism studies and virtue ethics, the program links professional development to the broader goal of human flourishing. It underscores the importance of integrating technical expertise with the intellectual and character qualities necessary for ethical practice (Pellegrino, 2002). This unified approach fosters coherence between personal and professional ethics, helping to prevent compartmentalized or fragmented moral reasoning.

Moreover, the emphasis on professional virtues aligns with the competency-based education model prevalent in Spanish higher education, which seeks to combine technical proficiency with moral and educational dimensions (Astigarraga Echevarría & Carrera Farran, 2018). By highlighting the ethical core of professional identity, the program enriches students' understanding of their future professions, cultivating both technical excellence and moral character.

The development of the LCP

The LCP was launched as an eleven-week pilot in Spring 2024, featuring weekly 90-minute seminars, each focused on a specific virtue. Initially conducted within the Faculty of Law, Business, and Governance at UFV,[5] the program recruited 25 students from the third, fourth, and fifth years. These students were selected from 37 applicants using semi-random criteria, which included motivational responses, proportional representation across academic years and degree programs, and random selection within those parameters. Now implemented across most faculties at the university, the program concludes with a guest speaker session featuring a leadership expert. In addition, participants take part in three mentoring sessions led by seminar facilitators.

Sessions and methodology

The LCP employs educational methodologies rooted in virtue ethics and draws inspiration from programs such as Wake Forest University's *Program for Leadership and Character* and the *Oxford Character Project*. It applies the seven character education strategies proposed by Lamb et al. (2021a): habituation through practice, personal reflection, engagement with virtuous exemplars, dialogue to enhance virtue literacy, situational awareness, use of moral reminders, and cultivation of friendships of mutual accountability. These strategies are integrated throughout the program to foster the development of virtues effectively.

In alignment with the program's emotional-educational emphasis (see Different Types of Virtues), these character education strategies are implemented alongside emotional education strategies designed to promote the development of virtuous emotions. Since each virtue is intrinsically linked to corresponding emotional dispositions, character and emotional education strategies are addressed together in each session of the program.

For example, emotions such as fear and confidence are emphasized in sessions on fortitude, resilience, or hope—virtues that involve feeling the appropriate amount of these emotions toward the right objects, in the right context, and for the right duration (Aristotle, 2004, 1115b 18-19; 2007, 1389a 28). In the session devoted to *phrōnesis*, its role in regulating emotions was particularly emphasized (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024).

Purpose

Two sessions focused on *purpose*, emphasizing its role in fostering meaningful life constructs, identity development, and overall well-being (Bronk, 2024). From a general perspective—and in an effort to connect purpose with a virtue ethics framework—purpose is presented as a source of flourishing and thus an essential component of the good life (VanderWeele, 2017). Increasing attention is now being given to the relationship between purpose, virtue, and character development. Regardless of its degree of identification with particular virtues (Han, 2015), the program treats purpose as a 'necessary but not sufficient condition for flourishing' (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 40).

The exercises included in purpose sessions aimed to develop purpose as foundational to character while solidifying students' sense of meaning. The sessions began with a video screening of psychologist Jordan Peterson's talk *'The Potential You,'* which explores the purpose of life. Following the video, students were asked to reflect on key questions related to purpose, including identifying the 'movers' or motivating forces in their lives, and considering whether all of these are equally worthy. Having identified what drives them personally, students then explored the concept of purpose and its awakening factors through two recorded lectures by purpose specialist William Damon (2009).

Another activity invited the students to select achievements from leaders they admire and reflect on how a strong sense of purpose shaped those realizations. Additional activities guided students in reflecting on personal motivators, identifying and mapping their core values, and considering how those values could be integrated into relationships and community life.

Practical wisdom (Phrōnesis)

Significantly, the first session of the program devoted to the virtues focuses on *practical wisdom* (*phrōnesis*). Due to the unique status that practical wisdom appears to hold in moral development, various virtue theories consistently highlight its centrality. As a result, *phrōnesis* is increasingly taking a leading role in character education as well (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024), and it is regarded as one of the most significant virtues within the program. Considered a meta-virtue 'orchestrating' the other virtues (Kristjánsson et al., 2021), it is described as 'the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time' (Schwartz &

Sharpe, 2010, p. 4). Practical wisdom functions in every virtuous action by providing sound judgment across moral domains, where specific virtues must be developed and enacted (De Caro et al., 2018).

From an educational standpoint, the activities included in the *phrōnesis* session aim to address its recommended pedagogical components or functions, such as its emotional-regulative and 'blueprint' roles (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024).

A central exercise in the session invited students to identify past situations in which they had acted in morally commendable ways—instances in which they exercised virtues they believe they possess—as well as situations in which they had made moral mistakes, acted wrongly, or recognized the influence of their vices. They were then asked to analyze the reasons behind both their morally successful and unsuccessful actions, identifying the possible causes of their virtue-driven or vice-driven behavior.

This reflective practice helped students recognize areas for growth, such as faulty reasoning, emotional dysregulation, or decisions made without adequately contextualizing the situation within a broader understanding of the goods that shape a meaningful life. In doing so, the exercise fosters the development of *phrōnesis* by addressing its core components and cultivating the judgment necessary for wise and virtuous action.

Humility

Humility serves as a balancing virtue between arrogance and diffidence (T. Porter et al., 2022). It enables a more accurate self-perception and self-assessment, involving a proper acknowledgment of both one's strengths and weaknesses (Nielsen et al., 2010). Humility fosters the development of relevant elements for moral growth, such as recognizing one's mistakes or maintaining low self-focus (Tangney, 2000). Leadership scholars increasingly highlight the significance of humility (Morris et al., 2005). Humility contributes to a deeper exploration of one's identity, so it is considered a key virtue for character development and is included in the program.

In a range of reflective activities, the students considered why humble individuals tend to be attractive or admirable, identified their own strengths and weaknesses, and engaged in memory-based and gratitude exercises. They also completed the *Relational Humility Scale* (Davis et al., 2011), created a personal humility motto as a daily reminder, and set self-improvement goals.

Temperance

Temperance is the virtue that moderates and harmonizes the plurality of non-rational tendencies in human beings—including desires, drives, appetites, and the broad spectrum of human emotions—with rational capacities (Porter, 1987). One of the primary reasons for including temperance in the program, beyond its essential role in a flourishing moral life, is its enduring portrayal as a sustaining virtue—one that upholds and supports a life of virtue through continuous self-regulation and balance (Porter, 1987).

The session on temperance was inspired by listening to and reflecting on the lyrics of Billie Eilish's *What Was I Made For?*, which served as a prompt for students to consider the meaning of life and the emotional dimensions of human experience. Activities focused on the development of self-control, goal setting, time management, and the capacity to delay gratification.

Resilience

Resilience is conceptualized as the process, ability, or outcome of successfully adapting despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Masten et al., 1990). The development of resilience is central to many character education initiatives, including those grounded in positive psychology, and also in neo-Aristotelian frameworks (Brooks et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2021b). It is widely recognized as a powerful strength of character that enhances other virtues and contributes to the pursuit of a meaningful life and overall well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Both its widespread inclusion in programs with different foundational assumptions and its role in supporting the development of other virtues—justify its place within the LCP. In addition, while debates continue regarding whether resilience itself qualifies as a virtue (Peterson & Kristjánsson, 2024), recent conceptual developments suggest strong affinities with specific virtues in the virtue ethics tradition, particularly fortitude (Titus, 2006).

In the session on resilience, students explored how to embrace challenges, delay gratification, and build supportive relationships, reinforcing the relevance of this character trait for moral development and flourishing. Psychological strategies such as selective attention and anticipation were introduced to help strengthen resilience.

Gratitude

Gratitude involves the habituation of recognizing and appreciating the benefits received from others, as well as acknowledging the positive aspects of life and the contributions of others (Morgan et al., 2015). Given its deep relational nature and the awareness it fosters of our dependence on others for individual flourishing, gratitude is rightly included among the core virtues in the LCP.

In the session on gratitude, participants examined its connection to happiness, contrasted it with the habit of complaining (Howells, 2004), and reflected on the role of gratitude in professional and workplace settings (Wood et al., 2010). Activities included a seven-day gratitude challenge (Froh et al., 2008), maintaining a gratitude journal (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), and expressing gratitude visually through social media platforms. These practices aimed to foster both the emotional and behavioral expression of gratitude as a central component of virtuous living.

Service

The session on *service* emphasized actions that benefit others while simultaneously fostering personal and professional growth (Greenleaf, 1977). In addition to reinforcing the relational dimension of virtue and character development, the central importance of service in the exercise of leadership strongly supports its inclusion in the program. Students analyzed the lives of leaders who exemplify service and justice, reflected on personal experiences of injustice, and were also invited to consider how service is expressed in their daily relationships—with family, peers, and within university life.

Hope

The final session on virtues centered on *hope* as a virtue or character trait that habituates us to expect the future with optimism, to believe that circumstances can improve, and to trust that goals are attainable. Hope provides motivation, resilience, and the capacity for overcoming obstacles and engaging in creative problem-solving (Lamb, 2022). In

leadership contexts, Maxwell (2011) emphasizes the importance of hope in inspiring and guiding others, underlining its transformative potential. For these reasons, hope is not only integrated into the LCP as a virtue but also as a powerful promoter of life meaning.

In the session, students recalled personal experiences of hope, reflected on ways to console others in difficult times, and analyzed the enduring hope shown by the parents of Madeleine McCann (McCann & McCann, 2011). They identified leaders in their own lives who exemplify hope and were given a coffee mug as a symbolic reminder to sustain hope in daily life, reinforcing its role in fostering both resilience and a hopeful, optimistic orientation toward the future.

Conclusions

There is a growing awareness of the role universities play in shaping students' lives and influencing their character development. Within this context, the *Leaders of Character Program* (LCP) represents a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to character education. It draws upon well-established virtue ethics frameworks and integrates innovative methodologies to promote moral and personal growth in higher education.

This paper has focused on describing the program's overall design and foundational educational insights, rather than presenting empirical results, as research on the program's impact is currently ongoing. Consequently, some conclusions supported by quantitative and qualitative studies are still forthcoming. Nonetheless, the LCP builds upon the foundation of similar virtue and character education programs, which have already published positive empirical outcomes regarding students' moral development (Brant et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2021b). These programs, which share core philosophical and pedagogical foundations with the LCP, offer existing evidence that informs and supports the program's theoretical development and instructional design.

Although the empirical study on the LCP is still in progress and will be presented in a separate publication, this existing evidence reinforces the credibility of the program's foundational approach. One of the aims of the research is to adapt these international models of virtue and character education to the Spanish higher education context, where such initiatives remain scarce (Cohen de Lara et al., 2024).

The working hypothesis is that students who complete the course will exhibit significant positive changes in virtue development, differing notably from a control group. Preliminary comparisons between pre- and post-course self-reports suggest statistically significant growth in target virtues and leadership capacities among participants. While these initial results still require further analysis, they align with the outcomes observed in comparable programs. Early qualitative findings, though also preliminary, similarly support the conclusion that the program contributes meaningfully to both moral and professional development (Brant et al., 2020).

While mirroring the assessment frameworks of other virtue and character education initiatives in universities—many of which have demonstrated effectiveness (Brant et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2021b)—the LCP introduces several distinctive contributions. These include the measurement of a specific leadership construct, the use of tailored virtue scales (as focal virtues vary across programs), and a strong emphasis on qualitative research. This qualitative dimension is advanced through a broad set of semi-structured interviews with participants, which are especially important given

that virtuous action inherently involves intentions, meaning, and purpose, all dimensions best captured through qualitative assessment (Alexander, 2016).

At the same time, the program's implementation and its educational insights allow for several conclusions and promising outcomes. The program fosters a holistic view of human flourishing by integrating intellectual, emotional, and moral dimensions. It bridges theoretical concepts from virtue ethics with practical applications, including emotional education strategies, thereby promoting virtue literacy. Through activities such as self-reflection, creative exercises, case studies, and engagement with virtuous exemplars, the program offers a well-rounded approach to virtue cultivation. Students perceive the exercises associated with each specific virtue as both practical and effective. By emphasizing professional virtues and embedding character education within specific disciplines, the program also prepares participants for ethical leadership. Additionally, it reinforces virtue individualization, helping students to distinguish, internalize, and personalize virtues, including their emotional dimensions, which vary uniquely from person to person.

Another significant conclusion relates to the program's contribution to the university's broader formative structure. This integration has been achieved by complementing the university's liberal education courses—particularly ethics—and by involving local experts and collaborating with key university stakeholders. UFV, like many other institutions, offers a coherent liberal education program known as 'Humanistic Formation.' This curriculum includes courses in anthropology, ethics, theology, and Great Books, aiming to provide students with a general education that transcends specialized professional training while fostering responsible citizenship. Rooted in the liberal education tradition, it emphasizes whole-person development and education oriented toward a good life (Roche, 2010). While this paper does not examine in depth how liberal education contributes directly to moral character, it acknowledges that humanistic education is often described as 'structured learning that aims at human flourishing' (DeNicola, 2012, p. 37).

The LCP has had a particular impact on ethics courses within this humanistic curriculum. With increasing institutional and scholarly interest in ethics education in higher education, the program supports developments that go beyond traditional ethics modules (De Ruyter & Schinkel, 2017). These include professional ethics instruction, the promotion of academic citizenship, and the cultivation of students' capacity to live morally good and meaningful lives. The program complements ethics courses by bridging the gap between abstract moral reasoning and real-life ethical decisions. It facilitates moral development by incorporating emotional and motivational dimensions essential to ethical behavior, thereby offering a more comprehensive and practical model of ethical education.

The progressive implementation of the program across the university's faculties has required the active involvement of local actors and close collaboration with university stakeholders. The inclusion of professional virtues, tailored to the specific needs and values of each academic discipline, has been a key factor in engaging local faculty experts. To ensure relevance and effectiveness, sessions on professional virtues were adapted to each faculty and led by academics from the respective Schools, drawing on their expertise and disciplinary insight.

The implementation of the program at the university and its impact on students is currently underway. The program is being developed in five different schools within the university (see note n. 5). An experimental group of approximately 25 students is recruited in each school, resulting in an overall impact on about 100 students across the university. The recruitment of about 25 students, who voluntarily apply to participate in the program, is intended to create a comfortable environment for discussion-based sessions.

The progressive implementation plan includes two main objectives. Firstly, the program will be further developed in two additional faculties that have expressed interest in adopting it, aiming to involve all schools at the university. Secondly, more groups will be progressively created for each school.

The LCP exemplifies an adaptable and effective model for character education in higher education. While it has demonstrated immediate benefits in enhancing virtue literacy and reflective practice, its long-term impact on students' behavior and ethical decision-making remains to be evaluated. Developing a longitudinal study, including alumni feedback and periodic follow-up, would provide valuable insights into the program's lasting influence and inform future improvements.

Notes

1. See, for instance, regarding temperance *Nicomachean Ethics* 1119b 16–17; and on hope *Nicomachean Ethics* 1382a, *Rhetoric* 1389a 28.
2. The virtue framework nurturing the program is the framework of the Virtue and Values Education Centre, held at UFV, which runs the LCP.
3. Unlike 'other-regarding virtues' (Carr, 1984/1985; Von Wright, 1993), we view relational virtues not only as involving other persons but also as embracing the specific types of relationships these interactions foster and their role in virtue development. Similarly, while Um (2021) frames 'personal virtues' within intimate relationships, our approach extends relational virtues to encompass excellence across a broader range of human connections.
4. The concept of transcendence we are encompassing promotes transcendence and its virtues —hope as the virtue included in the program—from both theological/theistic and non-theistic perspectives. We address transcendence in a way that does not necessarily require a specific transcendent object (though it includes this possibility). As Cottingham (2012) notes, transcendence does not necessarily involve 'a move from "transcendent" longings to a transcendent object of those longings' (p. 1). In this sense, for example, a theistic (or religious) thinker may view the human psyche as opening itself to God, whereas a secular thinker might see it as oriented toward earthly realities beyond the self. Regardless of the perspective, self-transcendence can be developed to varying degrees and it occurs comparably in both cases.
5. The program is currently implemented in the Schools of Law, Business and Governance, Communication, Education and Psychology, Experimental Sciences, and Medicine, with plans to expand to other university faculties that have expressed interest in adopting it.

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