

CHARACTER  
EDUCATION  
SERIES

# IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE: CLASSICAL EDUCATION AS CHARACTER EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

by Clare Basil



The R Street Institute's Character Education Series is a collection of case studies that highlight particular programs around the country that are finding unique ways to fuse character education into their curriculums and pedagogies. Although each of the programs is unique and has its own nuanced approach, in the aggregate, these studies show that the desire for schools—at all levels—to strive for excellence and to produce good people and citizens is alive and well—and growing.



# Foreword

America's founders believed that character education should play a key role in the nation's school system. Indeed, in drafting Massachusetts' Constitution—one of the major models for the U.S. Constitution—John Adams acknowledged its importance at the outset, explaining that “wisdom and knowledge, as well as *virtue*” weren't just important but “*necessary* for the preservation of [...] rights and liberties.” As R Street tackles the role of civil society in a democracy strained by political polarization, issues of character are at least as important now as they were in Adams' time.

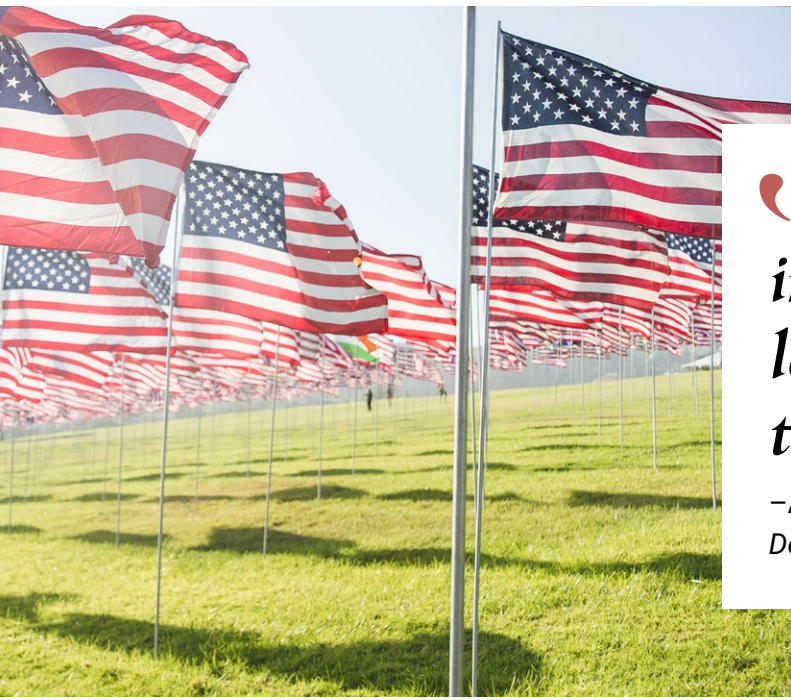
As such, an exploration of a teacher education program that puts questions of character center stage is all the more timely. The University of Dallas' Teacher Classical Education Graduate program does not just teach out of textbooks but instead explores questions like “Does the right kind of mathematics lesson help inculcate personal virtue?” or “Can the study of rhetoric improve political discourse on the national stage?” Ambitiously, UD's program not only aims to shape teachers for the classroom but also to help them emerge as more virtuous human beings who, in turn, help produce virtuous citizens in the form of their students.

The curriculum at UD is, at once, deeply conservative and profoundly radical: on one hand, it grounds itself in classical texts, medieval curricular distinctions and old-fashioned methods of teaching. On the other, it makes the implicit promise that serious engagement with specific texts can reshape character and personality for the better. To be sure, it is a tall order and, as the Classical Education Graduate Program has only existed since 2016, it will be some time before it is possible to reach a verdict on its efficacy. So far, however, the program has grown quickly, attracted significant interest and some of its credentials are now accepted in virtually all states. Accordingly, if nothing else, UD's program offers a compelling and worthy new model for teacher education.

— Eli Lehrer,  
President, R Street Institute



# Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Teaching Character



“ I think that in no country in the civilized world is there less interest in philosophy than in the United States. ”

–Alexis de Tocqueville,  
*Democracy in America* (1840)

Tocqueville believed that the social conditions of America naturally inclined Americans to prefer activity over contemplation. In his understanding, equal political and social conditions enabled nearly everyone in America to constantly change their status, making American society turbulent and restless compared to Tocqueville’s native France, where aristocratic hierarchy dictated fixed social and political positions. Yet, this constant churning in the social life made Americans ill-disposed to take up extensive meditation and theoretical study, which he claimed require calmness and rest.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Why Americans Are More Attached to the Application of the Sciences than to the Theory* (Liberty Fund, 2010), Vol. II, pp. 775-87.

If his claim is accurate and still holds, character education that takes place largely within the classroom and claims reflection to be equal in importance to activity might strike Americans as impractical and antiquated. Nevertheless, the University of Dallas (UD), a liberal arts college, has established a new teacher preparation program premised on the belief that contemplation must precede action, and that understanding virtue is a precondition for intentional virtuous action.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the program's classical theory of character education eschews the pragmatic idea that education is primarily concerned with gaining a fixed set of skills and instead offers an education devoted to fostering inquiry, cultivating virtue and ultimately, inculcating wisdom. Far from being impractical, the program's leaders hold that these pursuits develop the highest capacities of human nature and promote human flourishing. To help translate this into concrete pedagogical practice, UD established a master's program in the humanities, which trains K-12 teachers in both the theory and practices of classical education that are most suitable for teaching the classical liberal arts in K-12 classrooms.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey S. Lehman, "Socratic Conversation and the Pursuit of Virtue," [Linkedin](#), March 26, 2020.



# The UD Program

Established in the Summer of 2016, the UD program was created to provide K-12 classical schools with teachers who were better trained toward their mission.<sup>3</sup> Since then, it has grown rapidly, from 15 students to over 120 as of Spring 2020, doubling in size every year since the Fall of 2016. This is partially due to the flexibility of the program, which can be completed at one's own pace, online, in person or as a hybrid.<sup>4</sup> A number of specialized tracks have developed around the original course of study, but the core—the focus of this report—is a 36-credit program with three parts: **1)** the Great Books; **2)** the seven liberal arts; and **3)** pedagogy and practice. The program's goal is to cultivate excellence in the art of teaching and enable educators to pursue virtue and help their students do the same.

The program's architects, Drs. Matthew Post, Jeffrey Lehman and John Peterson, have complementary areas of specialization corresponding to each of these three pillars. While the program's requirements are shifting in the Fall of 2020 to place greater emphasis on the liberal arts and pedagogy, its components are united by a common vision of virtue: All virtues are, at their core, forms of moral and intellectual excellences that arise from human nature. Rather than viewing character as a set of particular actions or an isolated component of one's life, virtue is understood as an orientation of the soul toward excellence, which can be manifested in everyday activities.

The proposition guiding the program is that sustained, intentional attention to and reflection upon excellence forms students' intellects to recognize its marks. With this understanding, students should then pursue excellence to develop virtue in their own lives. Dr. John Peterson, Manager of Interdisciplinary Programs, explains that while there are certainly describable characteristics of excellence, it is best understood by being observed in models of human action that can be venerable and inspiring.<sup>5</sup>

3 For a brief history of these schools and the larger movement they form, see: Ian Lindquist, "Classical Schools in Modern America," *National Affairs*, Fall 2019.

4 For written testimonials from headmasters about the UD program's academic excellence, see some of its collected testimonies, which were designed to evaluate and promote the program.

5 Author interview with John Peterson (email), April 19, 2020.



## THE GREAT BOOKS

The program's Great Books component consists of six humanities courses covering periods of Western history from ancient to contemporary times.<sup>6</sup> Students choose which of these to take but, in each, they encounter timeless works—texts, plays, dialogues, art and music—that are meant to help them appreciate how excellence has been understood in the past so they can pursue it in the present. Peterson explains that this requires students to approach these works with a spirit of reverence, submitting themselves to the wisdom of the authors, arguing that in “studying great and profound texts, we read not so that we may twist and bend what we read to conform to ourselves and our expectations, our categories of thought, but so that we may be transformed by them.”<sup>7</sup>

For this to occur, some prejudices must be challenged. For example, current student, Melody Van Tassell a high school teacher, explains that if a text is to be formative of one's character, the teacher and students must view their lives in relation to it and then be persuaded that it is relevant to them. This is a difficult task because, as she explains, one tends to see classics as distant and circumscribed, “as if the claims a text from ancient Greece makes about human nature and the nature of justice could have no relation to one's life today.”<sup>8</sup> If this attitude prevails, it is unlikely a student will take seriously the text's lessons because it can be dismissed as far removed and irrelevant to contemporary circumstances.

This impulse is an obstacle the program works to overcome by demonstrating how all works studied are perennially relevant because they capture enduring truths about human excellence. As Dr. Matthew Post, Associate Dean of UD's Braniff Graduate School and the program's founding director, explains, even if contemporary works appear more pertinent, focusing exclusively on them is insufficient because it, “fails to show continuities across cultures at different times and places, effectively making character education a poorly grounded fad of the moment, not an enduring pursuit.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he emphasizes: “when works from across the ages are studied rightly, one sees for themselves that there are consistencies as regards key features of human nature and character.”<sup>10</sup> This is not accomplished quickly, but rather is the desired result of the entire course of study because, as Post explains, such a result:

is only possible when you ask the kinds of hard questions that go beyond our first, second or third impression of the text, and challenge certain

6 See University of Dallas, “2019-2020 Course Bulletin: Humanities MA Requirements,” last accessed Aug. 30, 2020, pp. 340-41.

7 Peterson interview.

8 Author interview with Melody van Tassell (telephone), April 8, 2020.

9 Author interview with Matthew Post (telephone), April 16, 2020.

10 Ibid.

prejudices. Foremost among these is the assumption that we cannot learn a moral truth from our discussion of the great works because we are already in possession of that truth or because there are no such truths. Second is the claim that asserting a moral truth is by definition authoritarian, denying the possibility that humility and respect for others may rest upon such truths. Of course, everyone can and should weigh all the possible answers for themselves, but we cannot properly take up the questions if we think we know the answers in advance.<sup>11</sup>

Depending upon the format of the course and the individual professor's preferences, the mode of asking such questions may take the form of Socratic seminars, written exchanges, online discussion boards, or response papers and debates. Authors are studied as though they are in conversation with one another, and students are invited to participate in that discussion. Indeed, the program maintains that education is not a solitary endeavor, but one best undertaken in community. Thus, while programming varies, all inquiries are anchored in communal deliberation, which is refined and made possible by individual effort in other assignments.

Engaging seriously with one author requires that the reader also engage with those who disagree. This is not simply for intellectual precision, but central to shaping character.<sup>12</sup> By reckoning with profound disagreements between authors, the program aims to ensure that the virtues pursued result from a student's deliberate choice, rather than reflexive reaction to one author, artist or age. As Peterson explains:

Because liberal education has freedom as its end, studying the liberal arts must involve close consideration of different types of greatness and excellence in thought and art, so that the result of our study is self-government, and not the tyranny of a single author or artist, no matter how excellent their work or art.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, students can read both Aristotle and Locke, Aquinas and Hobbes, Augustine and Nietzsche, Plato and Rousseau, Cicero and Machiavelli—that is, authors within the same tradition, but who seem to disagree about answers to fundamental questions.<sup>14</sup>

Attaining a complete picture of excellence through human reason is impossible. Such an endeavor is circumscribed by natural human limitations. But, this does not dissuade the program from pursuing excellence, as Post stresses: “Appreciating

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Peterson interview.

14 Post interview.

fundamental limits fosters humility, a virtue that, when exercised properly, does not devolve into intense skepticism or relativism, but rather motivates civil discourse, ingenuity and a redoubled commitment to pursuing genuine excellence.”<sup>15</sup> Confidence in the ability to recognize components of excellence and humility in the face of complexity produces a creative tension the program constantly navigates. This tension prevents studies from devolving into platitudes, the kind of which can give character education a bad name.

For Ron Bergez, an alumnus with 32 years of experience in K-12 education, it was precisely this tension that made the program worthwhile:


What made it possible for me to engage in these questions were the subtleties involved and the starting point that we can’t just work off some past assumptions about virtue. It was by thinking about, wrestling with and being exposed to virtue that I came to find exactly what I needed.<sup>16</sup>

Maintaining this balance demands that students engage with critiques of the program’s own course of study. In the courses *History of Liberal Arts Education* and *Philosophy of Education*, students grapple with why the liberal arts fell into disuse, why modern thinkers like Rousseau diverged from the liberal arts as conceived by Plato and how each author is interpreted by modern adherents.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, by understanding those who have shaped distinct conceptions of education, students grow to appreciate both the promise and the challenge of liberal education for cultivating virtue.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Author interview with Ron Bergez (telephone), April 15, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> For a more in-depth description, see sample syllabus of Dr. Post’s *Philosophy of Education* course.



“ Because liberal education has freedom as its end, studying the liberal arts must involve close consideration of different types of greatness and excellence in thought and art ... ”

—Dr. Peterson





## THE LIBERAL ARTS

The second component of the program fosters excellence by cultivating what it understands as most distinctive about human beings (namely, our rationality and liberty) through the seven liberal arts. This is known as the “trivium,” the arts of the word (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the “quadrivium,” the arts of number (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). Jerilyn Olson, a current student and VP of Faculty Development at Great Hearts Academies explains:

If we aim to become excellent, we must consider all the ways in which human beings operate and pursue excellence within those activities. The seven liberal arts are an attempt to encompass and understand the whole of the human, for they include both the theoretical and the physical, language, both verbal and written, and mathematics.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Post maintains these are not simply studies, but “windows into who we are as rational and free humans.” As an example, he explains how the trivium cultivates human reason, which he understands as “the capacity by which we have community with others.” He explains, “through words we pursue the truth, through analysis and debate we exercise liberty, and by speech we evaluate and give or withhold our consent to the courses of action that we contemplate.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, by cultivating what is most excellent in human nature, these arts help one to flourish.

The liberal arts are equally vital for cultivating civic virtue because a close study of speech engenders confidence in persuasion, debate and compromise over the alternative: force. In Peterson’s account, America’s strained civil discourse is partially because, “underneath our conversation, there is no confidence that it is actually possible to know the truth together, so speech just becomes another expression of power, not linked to rationality but to the laws of material force.”<sup>20</sup> By contrast, a close study of language reveals our capacity to pursue truth, debate and persuade each other of a common good.

Paul Boyer, a current student who serves as a high school teacher and a state legislator, explains how this type of study prompted him to reflect on his own discourse in the legislature. He recalls the words of Cicero, one of antiquity’s great rhetoricians, who commands one to: “keep faith with one’s opponents by considering not just the words one uses, but also the intent behind them.”<sup>21</sup> The trivium cultivates such intentionality by focusing on both the formal mechanics of language and the purposes for which they should be employed.

18 Author interview with Jerilyn Olson (telephone), April 17, 2020.

19 Post interview.

20 Peterson interview.

21 Author interview with Paul Boyer (telephone), April 3, 2020.

This makes it beneficial for public servants and private citizens alike. As Bergez explains:

If we're going to have a well-functioning republic, we are in need of people who understand rhetoric as consumers, rather than producers, of words. Speeches are not just fancy words, but a way to move the human spirit. We need a populace that is sensitive to how speeches are moving their souls, who are able to respond to those speeches appropriately because they have a sense of rhetoric's power to either elevate or corrupt us.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mandate the use of language to accomplish specific political goals, but equips students with the habits of mind necessary to respectfully engage in public dialogue.<sup>23</sup>

Analogously, the quadrivium aspires to bring innate human capacities to standards of excellence and cultivate virtue in professional life. In Post's view, the quadrivium can establish the foundation for ethics in the workplace: namely, respect for human nature. He explains that although rightfully esteemed for their many accomplishments, mathematics and STEM generally can be studied in a manner that minimizes the human element.<sup>24</sup> In STEM, humans are usually studied as matter; this is important, Peterson notes, but it is equally important to study the human's distinctive position within the world as one possessed of reason and liberty.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Drs. Post and Peterson maintain that the division between the sciences and humanities is premised on an exaggerated fact-value divide that can be bridged because STEM is ultimately about studying the natural order, of which humans are a part.<sup>26</sup>

In their diagnosis, failing to appreciate the human element in the theory underlying STEM fields makes it easier for biases to influence research and for human beings to be understood too narrowly, potentially corroding the more holistic approaches necessary to foster professional ethics.<sup>27</sup> Post explains:

22 Bergez interview.

23 For a more detailed account of the trivium, see the University of Dallas' free online-teaching resource, *The Arts of Liberty*, specifically, the sections on Logic and Rhetoric. See also Jeffrey S. Lehman, "[Why Rhetoric?: Thoughts from Plato and Aristotle](#)," LinkedIn, April 17, 2017.

24 Post interview.

25 Peterson interview.

26 Post interview; Peterson interview.

27 Post also cites a report from the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine (NASEM) to suggest this prescription is not unique to UD but is shared by NASEM, a notable STEM-focused institution. For a brief summary, see National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, "[Report Urges Development and Evaluation of Approaches that Integrate STEMM Fields with Arts and Humanities in Higher Education](#)," Press Release, May 17, 2018. For access to the full report, see "[The Integration of the Humanities with Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in Higher Education: Branches from the Same Tree](#)," National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018.

For better or worse, we often see ourselves and the world through our own inventions. For example, the invention of the watch prompted an understanding of the human psyche as a kind of clockwork and the divine creator as akin to a watchmaker. We must never lose our humanity in how we are reflected in human works, to assume that because we develop tools and collect resources to sustain human life, that human life itself is merely a tool or a resource to be used.<sup>28</sup>

To remedy this, the program aims to integrate the study of the human and the world within a general study of nature. As Peterson explains, the quadrivium helps to: “put science and mathematics, in both their theoretical and applied forms, in the service of the human being, not as mere technology but as arts of understanding the human and her relation to the world.”<sup>29</sup> It does so by demonstrating that mathematical and scientific reasoning are profoundly human activities that extend far beyond experimentation and calculation, which can be done by mere machines. Rather, these activities are forms of wisdom that illuminate the relationship between us and the world. To take one example, Post explains how the quadrivium begins with mathematics and culminates in music:

Music is mathematically describable harmonies that are objectively real and evoke human emotions in us with a surprising degree of consistency. While tastes differ, we can identify music that elicits aggression, sorrow or joy. These objectively real, mathematically describable harmonies resonate in the most intimate parts of the human being.<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, coming to understand this is not the result of a single study, but is dependent upon how one progresses through the disciplines and understands the relations between them.<sup>31</sup>

28 Post interview.

29 Peterson interview.

30 Post interview.

31 For a more detailed account of the quadrivium, see the University of Dallas’ free online teaching resource, *The Arts of Liberty*, specifically, the sections on arithmetic and geometry and astronomy. See also Jeffrey S. Lehman, [“The Cave and the Quadrivium: Mathematics in Classical Education,”](#) LinkedIn, Feb. 7, 2020.



## THE UD DIFFERENCE

To clarify the key features of UD's program, it is helpful to contrast it with other models. Much of contemporary character education focuses on "performance virtues" (like grit and resilience) or Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which helps to understand emotions and develop interpersonal relationships.<sup>32</sup> While Post emphasizes that these qualities are indispensable, he argues that they alone are insufficient for virtue: absent a consideration about the ends these characteristics serve, they can become vices.<sup>33</sup>

He explains: "One who commits a crime may exercise performance virtues, such as teamwork or resilience, and yet not exhibit intellectual, moral or civic virtue. Likewise, the ability to manage anger does not mean that one won't use that understanding to manipulate others."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Post maintains virtues are not simply activities, but activities that are oriented toward worthy, moral ends: "Courage is only properly courage when it is in service to the defense of our community, to justice and to truth."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, any account of virtue is completed by a consideration of whether it is oriented toward a proper end. This requires some account of truth, justice and other conceptions of the 'good' that are not instrumental, but worthy in themselves.

This is the most important element of the program's approach to character education: namely, its explicit attempt to attain—through open-ended intellectual inquiry and in humble recognition of inherent limitations—an understanding of truth, excellence and the ultimate aim of human life. As Post explains, the proposition guiding all their inquiries is that, "there are truths that exist independent of the human mind and have positive moral significance for each person's life."<sup>36</sup>

This claim lays the foundation for all study and is essential for character education because it suggests that virtuous behavior should be pursued because it is the consequence of truths rooted in nature, and that living by them satisfies what is best in our nature.<sup>37</sup> If one does not abide by this, the possibility arises that virtuous

32 For an overview of these subjects, see Andy Smarick, "[Statecraft is Still Soulcraft: Character Education is a Condition for Self Government](#)," *The American Conservative*, May/June 2020, pp. 28-31.

33 For more extensive commentary, Dr. Post recommends: James Arthur et al., *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 31, 110.

34 Post interview.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 For further reading on the importance of this claim but from the perspective of psychological research, Dr. Post recommends: Kristján Kristjánsson, *The Self and Its Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); and David I. Walker et al., "[Towards a New Era of Character Education in Theory and in Practice](#)," *Educational Review* 67:1 (2015), pp. 79-96. For an example of how the denial of this can concretely hamper character education at the K-12 level, Dr. Peterson suggests: Justin McBrayer, "[Why Our Children Don't Think There Are Moral Facts](#)," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2015.



activity is undertaken only because of convention or to advance one's self interest. Post offers an example: "Someone could do community service to get into a good school and then, once they enter their profession, do all manner of unethical things because their service was always for the purpose of personal advancement, never for the sake of virtue."<sup>38</sup>

One might worry that holding that there is truth would lead to dogmatism or that appeals to moral truth can be abused as tools of manipulation. But, the program maintains that truth actually encourages open, serious dialogue. Post explains that because they maintain there is a truth to be sought and that virtue is real, "we can openly invite those who disagree into dialogue, confident that if someone pursues these questions with a sincere spirit of inquiry and receptivity, we will make progress in understanding virtue and attaining the truth together."<sup>39</sup> In fact, they think the opposite assumption would produce troubling results. As Peterson explains:

A belief that there is no truth in human affairs and that everything is a matter of relativistic opinion does not lead to a soft and weak espousal of opinion; on the contrary, because deep down those with this belief know their opinions can have no other foundation, they may be inclined to espouse them all the more adamantly, even violently, because the only true foundation they can have is force.<sup>40</sup>

By engaging with thinkers who disagree about what is true, students learn to pursue this question humbly and with rigor, making them less vulnerable to sophistry while also less dogmatic. Moreover, maintaining that humans are distinguished by their rationality and freedom demands the pursuit of inquiries in a manner that is always respectful of interlocutors.

The 17 diverse educational institutions that have partnered with the program—representing secular, civic, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish organizations—offer some evidence of the compatibility of this pursuit of truth and respectful pluralism.<sup>41</sup> This secular vision of humans as rational and free can be complemented by what religious denominations claim to know about humans by revelation. Dr. Jeffrey Lehman, professor of the humanities and philosophy, explains: "At its best, religiously motivated character education is grounded in some form of revealed communication from God that seeks to encourage moral rectitude out of fidelity to God and for the inherent good of the rational creature."<sup>42</sup> This, importantly, is compatible with classical education because,


<sup>38</sup> Post interview.

<sup>39</sup> Post interview.

<sup>40</sup> Peterson interview.

<sup>41</sup> Internal records provided courtesy of Matthew Post.

<sup>42</sup> Author interview with Jeffrey S. Lehman (email), April 4, 2020.



*By engaging with thinkers who disagree about what is true, students learn to pursue this question humbly and with rigor...*

“unlike religiously motivated character formation, the understanding of intellectual and moral virtue in classical education is derived from a study of human nature itself.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the program’s study of human nature is anchored by antiquity’s pre-Christian authors and complemented by religious and secular writers alike.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing *why* the program thinks one ultimately pursues virtue. In their understanding, it is because it is rooted in enduring truths of human nature that satisfy us when we live up to them. Jerilyn Olson explains: “The reason why we pursue virtue is to allow us to become more excellent in the core of who we are as humans.”<sup>44</sup> Dr. Post agrees: “Fostering service to others is virtuous not just because doing so feels good or promises rewards in return—though both may be true—but also because dealing with others in a way that actualizes the free and responsible exercise of our reason and respects the free and responsible exercise of their reason satisfies what is most human in us.”<sup>45</sup>

The alternative motivations for pursuing virtue might be self-interest, unthinking habit or convention, all of which are subject to change. For example, one might ask: Are prohibitions against stealing merely convention for the sake of preservation and harmony, or do they also correspond to enduring truths about what is proper for humans? The program’s architects would maintain the latter, but if a student agrees, this results from reflection and free choice. Indeed, students are encouraged to exercise their rationality and liberty in rigorously debating the program’s guiding proposition and its consequences.

The program’s emphasis on freedom points to an essential characteristic (and potential limitation) of this approach to character education. Its architects agree with Post that: “If we accept that students are individuals possessed of liberty, then there is no guarantee that any given student will turn out as we wish.”<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, the program maintains that by seriously considering questions about virtue—free of ideological constraints—the likelihood that students will come to exercise the virtues freely increases significantly.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Olson interview.

<sup>45</sup> Post interview.

<sup>46</sup> Post interview.



# Pedagogy And Practice

The program's effects are intended to be wide-ranging: that is, it is designed only to influence its graduates but also the students they go on to teach in their K-12 schools. Currently, demand for the program is difficult to quantify. Indeed, it welcomes any teacher seeking to better integrate character education into their classroom, but their main constituency—K-12 classical schools—appears to be growing. Dr. Robert Jackson, who serves as director of the Institute for Classical Education and Chief Academic Officer at Great Hearts (two partner organizations of the program) notes:

Over the past 7 years, the Great Hearts network of classical charter schools has grown nearly 300 percent. In 2013, approximately 7,000 students were being served by 17 schools in Arizona. Today, the network is serving more than 20,000 students in 32 schools across three metropolitan areas, including Phoenix, San Antonio and Dallas/Fort Worth.<sup>47</sup>

Jackson also adds that: "Nationwide, approximately 115,000 students are served by classical charters today" and that "classical private schools are growing, although at a slower pace, given the tuition-dependent funding model."<sup>48</sup> In fact, internal research by Great Hearts estimates more than 60,000 students are being served by private classical schools, across the country (though this data has yet to be tabulated with the same level of scrutiny as the classical charters).<sup>49</sup>

He also helps to provide resources to and represent independent K-12 classical schools outside of the Great Hearts network, and explains that classical charters independent of Great Hearts have also seen growth: "Today, there are 225 classical charters currently in existence. More than 80 of those have been founded since just 2013."<sup>50</sup> Such growth is not without its challenges, however, as he explains that finding teachers well suited to teach in classical schools requires, "genuine 'lexical resuscitation' because the language of virtue is a bit old-fashioned in today's

<sup>47</sup> Author interview with Robert Jackson (email), July 29, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

vernacular.”<sup>51</sup> UD’s program is meant to encourage and continue this growth by forming teachers to be well versed in the language of virtue.<sup>52</sup>

Beyond resurrecting this language, the program is dedicated to demonstrating how virtue can manifest in the practice of teaching. Peterson maintains that the teacher is the greatest potential exemplar of excellence for K-12 students to emulate, so his or her own pedagogical practices both communicates content and models virtue.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the program increasingly emphasizes courses that examine appropriate methods for teaching the classical liberal arts at every grade level.

The preferred pedagogy of the program is the Socratic seminar, a model that is designed to allow students to bring their individual experiences into dialogue with the universal concerns of a particular text. The program aims to help teachers harmonize these elements so as to prompt students to confront their own prejudices that inhibit a serious consideration of virtue. Simultaneously, it also allows them to practice civility in conversations. As Post explains:

[The goal of the seminars is to] help students move beyond the half-way point of relativism to appreciate deeper continuities in what great works reveal about virtue, while still highlighting enough debates about the motivation, application and cultivation of it to avoid the intolerance of dogmatism.<sup>54</sup>

Despite this, the program is clear that such seminars are neither possible nor advisable in every context, especially in the earlier grades. Peterson explains that their pedagogical courses attempt to account for the strengths of competing pedagogies, classroom management strategies, assessment methods and discipline techniques so that teachers can make prudential judgements for their particular classroom.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, to ensure that the best elements of Socratic inquiry can be preserved in diverse settings, all students teach in a practicum and, starting in Fall 2020, will take the course Classical Pedagogy: Ancient and Modern, the purpose of which is to place the “practical concerns of mainstream pedagogy books, such as *Teach Like a Champion*, into conversation with the classical tradition, so as to directly address questions about how our understanding of virtue and the human

51 Author interview with Robert Jackson (email), April 14, 2020.

52 The program’s architects stress that while classical schools are the main constituency they serve, the program does not serve only self-identified classical schools but any teacher seeking to better incorporate character education into the classroom.

53 Peterson Interview

54 Post Interview. Also, for more detail on the virtues of Socratic seminars from the program’s perspective, see Jeffrey S. Lehman, *Plato to Socratic Conversation* (Classical Academic Press, forthcoming); Jeffrey S. Lehman, “Socratic Conversation and the Pursuit of Virtue,” LinkedIn, March 26, 2020.

55 Peterson Interview.



good inform the way schools are run, and the hundreds of small but consequential decisions teachers make daily.”<sup>56</sup>

This is complemented by the practicum, which is individually developed by the student in conversation with his or her school leaders and UD faculty. Depending upon the project, the practicum is completed within two years. Each student receives a faculty mentor, develops a system for measuring success and offers an account of how it fits within the needs of their particular grade, subject and school. Each practicum is observed and assessed by leaders in the student’s own school and reviewed by UD faculty. While there is much variety, all include three common elements:

1. Reading and written reflection on classical teaching;
2. Discussion on texts and pedagogical practices;
3. Application of these principles in the classroom to allow for concrete feedback and skill development.

Moreover, thoroughly understanding the seven liberal arts or any other skill requires practice. The program’s professors therefore ask prospective teachers to engage in the very activities they would assign their students. By requiring students to write lesson plans, design curricula and record demonstrations of their practice of these arts and skills, the arts of word and number link theory and practice.

Beyond these, a number of elective courses explore how particular subjects can apply the theory of classical education. For example, *Classical Pedagogy in the Science Classroom* explores how the modern sciences, although not present in the ancient world, are fundamental to the modern classroom and can be studied through Socratic inquiry. Likewise, *Foreign Language Pedagogy in Classical Elementary* examines modified versions of the Socratic method for foreign languages through guided discussion of stories, poetry, songs and nursery rhymes, while *Classical Children’s Literature* adapts Socratic inquiry to early grades so that stories that prompt children to wonder about the fairness or motives of characters’ actions can lead to guided conversation with the teacher. More broadly, courses such as *Plato and Socratic Conversation*, *Reading Strategies for Classical Epics*, *Writing as Imitation*, and *Teaching Great American Speeches* explore the techniques suitable for a specialized subject in light of the theory of classical education. Dr. Lehman also offers *Master Teachers in the Western Tradition*, which approaches great authors not primarily as thinkers, but fundamentally as teachers who can inform practice.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Peterson interview.

<sup>57</sup> For a more in depth description of select courses described above, see the syllabi for Dr. Peterson’s *Classical Pedagogy Ancient and Modern*, Dr. Lehman’s *Master Teachers in the Western Tradition* and Dr. Brian Polk’s *Classical Pedagogy in the Science Classroom*.



# Building for The Future

Combining both the theory and practice of classical education, UD's program is the first of its kind and the fruit of the university's longstanding commitment to the liberal arts. Dr. Lehman, who has taught at four universities focused on liberal education, most recently Hillsdale College, explains that he accepted a position at UD in 2019 because, "no other institution has such a profound understanding of the Western tradition and liberal education and is as fully committed to faithfully conveying and building upon that tradition today."<sup>58</sup> This tradition developed the intellectual and social capital necessary for the program. Indeed, it relies upon nine additional UD faculty—many of whom, Post notes, have K-12 experience—to teach courses within it. <sup>59</sup>

Two additional elements have facilitated the program's growth: offering courses online and a generous grant from the Charles Koch Foundation (CKF). Online courses were a necessary development given that K-12 classical teachers teach across the country and not all can enroll for in person instruction.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, online courses allow for savings to be passed onto students. Absent a scholarship, the program costs \$15,660, which is \$10,260 less than other masters degrees offered through UD's graduate school.<sup>61</sup> Yet, recognizing the value of face-to-face community, the program strongly encourages students to take in-person courses, which are available on UD's campuses, both in Texas and abroad in Rome, Italy and select satellite locations.<sup>62</sup>

It remains an open question whether online courses limit character formation. Van Tassell thinks that much of the best character formation, "comes from being in proximity to a person you admire and model yourself off of," which is lacking in online courses.<sup>63</sup> However, she adds that the practicum mediates this by restoring the in-person element. Likewise, Olson recognizes limitations, but notes that for an extensive school system like her own, the program simply deepens their pre-

<sup>58</sup> Lehman interview.

<sup>59</sup> Post Interview. For a full faculty list see: [udallas.edu](https://udallas.edu)

<sup>60</sup> For examples of where specifically classical K-12 schools are located, see: "Find a Classical Education Academy," Institute for Classical Education, 2018.; "Catholic Classical Liberal Arts Schools Map," Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, 2020. ; "School Database," Circe Institute, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> "Classical Education Scholarships," University of Dallas, last accessed Sept. 3, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> For a few brief examples of online course videos, see [udallas.edu](https://udallas.edu)

<sup>63</sup> Van Tassell interview.



*UD's program is the first of its kind and the fruit of the university's longstanding commitment to the liberal arts.*

existing community.<sup>64</sup> Even when engaged in online courses, Bergez and Boyer both stress that the endeavor is formative simply because of the self-reflection that is inevitably prompted by reading such profound texts in community with a professor as a guide.<sup>65</sup> Bergez adds that he became a “reluctant convert” to the possibilities of some online education. Compared to online courses he took at another university, UD’s offerings were far superior because the profundity of the content facilitated more robust online exchanges.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, the quality of UD’s online courses helped it to land the \$1.09 million grant from CKF in Fall 2016, which encouraged higher enrollment by enabling UD to offer scholarships, develop additional online courses and support faculty salaries.<sup>67</sup> While online courses existed before the grant, their development has since increased by 200 percent, which allowed online enrollment to grow by 213 percent from the Fall of 2018 to the Fall 2019.<sup>68</sup> More importantly, the grant awarded scholarships to approximately 85 students.<sup>69</sup>

As the program’s size has grown, so has its scope. Over 15 subprograms have been launched or are in development in addition to the core 36-credit program described. This development has been encouraged by the 17 institutions UD partners with, each of which forms a unique relationship that is based upon the partner’s particular initiative. Notably, a few of these partnerships entail UD carefully selecting qualified onsite educators to teach select courses on a satellite campus closer to the partner’s physical location.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Olson interview.

<sup>65</sup> Bergez interview; Boyer interview.

<sup>66</sup> Bergez interview.

<sup>67</sup> University of Dallas, “\$1.09 Million Grant Will Support Enrichment, Certification for Classical School Teachers,” Press Release, Oct. 12, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Post interview.

<sup>69</sup> Peterson interview.

<sup>70</sup> Please note that all associated external faculty hold a PhD.

Five of these new areas especially merit mention for their relationship to governmental policies and for their novelty in classical education:



In Fall 2019, UD launched a pilot program designed as a classical-friendly teacher's certification to meet Texas' credentialing standards. Notably, Texas has credentialing reciprocity with 45 states.<sup>71</sup> Initially, program partners were private schools and charters from states that did not require state-approved teacher certification for all teachers. As interest grew and as educators sought to expand liberal arts-based character education in other states—38 of which require some or all charter teachers to be certified—a classical-friendly certification program proved indispensable.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the program allows UD to serve traditional public school teachers.



Subprograms are in development within UD's certification program that focus on special education and urban education tailored to classical education. UD students can attain these certifications while enrolled in the program, although they need not be enrolled in the certification track to take courses within it.



UD is developing a research institute and has launched a lab school to study the efficacy of character education grounded in the liberal arts and Great Books.<sup>73</sup>



To help communities integrate liberal arts-based character education, UD has partnered with a number of Catholic schools to offer recommendations, professional development, curricular materials and to respond to other specific requests so that these schools can transition to a classical liberal arts model.



UD offers professional development and curricular materials, helping teachers integrate classical education into the arrangement of the learning environment, lesson planning, classroom management and assessment. These are not offered as technical guides, but to apprentice teachers in becoming models of virtue, particularly prudence.<sup>74</sup>


71 "Texas Teacher Reciprocity Agreements," Teaching Certification, last accessed Sept. 3, 2020.

72 "Charter Schools: Do Teachers in a charter school have to be certified?", Education Commission of the States, last accessed Sept. 3, 2020. Please note that this surveys only 45 of 50 states.

73 Please scroll down to see, "Our Partnership with the University of Dallas," Bishop Louis Reicher School, 2020,

74 These are currently being piloted and will not be sold until the pilot phase is complete in approximately five years.





*We must never lose our humanity  
in how we are reflected in human  
works, to assume that because  
we develop tools and collect  
resources to sustain human life,  
that human life itself is merely  
a tool or a resource to be used.*

Dr. Matthew Post





# Conclusion

If the program's architects are correct that the highest virtues are precisely what is needed within the contemporary public square, these expansions are a welcome sign. While they maintain that all virtues are—at their heart—forms of moral and intellectual excellences that arise from human nature, they do believe that there is a hierarchy amongst these virtues, at the top of which is wisdom and charity.<sup>75</sup>

Although urgently needed, replenishing these virtues in the public square can never be accomplished through a sudden shift in policy, but must primarily be achieved by the long, gradual endeavor of forming individuals and communities in pursuit of them.<sup>76</sup> UD's classrooms and, by extension, their graduates' classrooms, are meant to be a place where these virtues are demanded and cultivated.

Indeed, the program claims that by deliberating about challenging and profound questions about the nature of excellence, justice, truth and beauty within the community of the classroom, one can cultivate wisdom and charity simultaneously. This is because it is only possible to have a successful dialogue—one that actualizes one's liberty and rationality—if these virtues are practiced. By habitually exercising them in Socratic conversation, the classical course of study is meant first and foremost to aid in orienting each person toward greater virtue, while also preparing him to practice these virtues beyond the classroom and in the civic realm.

As Post explains:

If we are to move forward in a way which addresses abuses, past and present, and treats others with the equity, civility and humanity to which their dignity entitles them, it is important that we remain open to the possibility that a human being's rights, liberties and duties are not just matters of subjective opinion or of power dynamics, but may rest on real and enduring moral foundations that merit our respect and fidelity.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, the program hopes that by inculcating a deep understanding of human excellence and how it is manifest in wisdom and charity, it can aid in forming individuals who are capable of contributing to communal and political flourishing as great citizens and statesmen.

<sup>75</sup> Lehman interview.

<sup>76</sup> Peterson interview.

<sup>77</sup> Post interview.

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