



## **Should Colleges Focus More on Personal and Social Responsibility?**

**Initial Findings from Campus Surveys Conducted for the  
Association of American Colleges and Universities as Part of Its Initiative,  
*Core Commitments: Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility***

Survey Administered and Report Written By

Eric L. Dey and Associates

Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education  
University of Michigan School of Education  
610 E. University  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259

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# ***Should Colleges Focus More on Personal and Social Responsibility?***

## **Overview**

On behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), researchers at the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education surveyed 23,000 undergraduate students and 9,000 campus professionals (faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs staff) at 23 institutions participating in the Templeton Foundation-supported initiative, *Core Commitments: Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility*. Data from the initial administration of the **Personal and Social Responsibility Institutional Inventory** (PSRII) in fall 2007 assessed the campus environment along five dimensions of personal and social responsibility: (1) striving for excellence; (2) cultivating personal and academic integrity; (3) contributing to a larger community; (4) taking seriously the perspectives of others; and (5) developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning.

## **About Core Commitments**

*Core Commitments: Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility* aims to reclaim and revitalize the academy's role in fostering students' development of personal and social responsibility. It is designed to help campuses create learning environments in which all students reach for excellence in the use of their talents, take responsibility for the integrity and quality of their work, and engage in meaningful practices that prepare them to fulfill their obligations as students in an academic community and as responsible global and local citizens.

## **About the Personal and Social Responsibility Institutional Inventory**

The PSRII is a *campus climate* survey developed as part of the *Core Commitments* initiative. It is designed to gauge participants' perceptions about the opportunities for learning and engagement with issues of personal and social responsibility across an institution. The Inventory consists of three types of questions about the five dimensions, tailored for each of the four constituent groups:

- **Attitudinal items:** participants choose the degree to which they agree with a statement about the institution (choosing from Strongly Agree, Agree Somewhat, Disagree Somewhat, Strongly Disagree, No Basis for Judgment)
- **Behavioral items:** participants choose the degree to which they experience a particular phenomenon at the institution (choosing from Frequently, Occasionally, Never)
- **Open-ended items:** participants provide text related to experiences, programs, and practices at the institution that help students to develop personal and social responsibility.

## Initial Findings

Colleges and universities strive to promote a wide range of outcomes among the students that they enroll and serve. One goal of the Core Commitments projects is to ascertain whether students, faculty, student affairs staff, and academic administrators think personal and social responsibility should be a major focus of college education, and how well they think their institutions are successfully focusing on such outcomes.

Data from the Core Commitments PSRII effort clearly demonstrate the importance of personal and social responsibility as a necessary component of a college education:

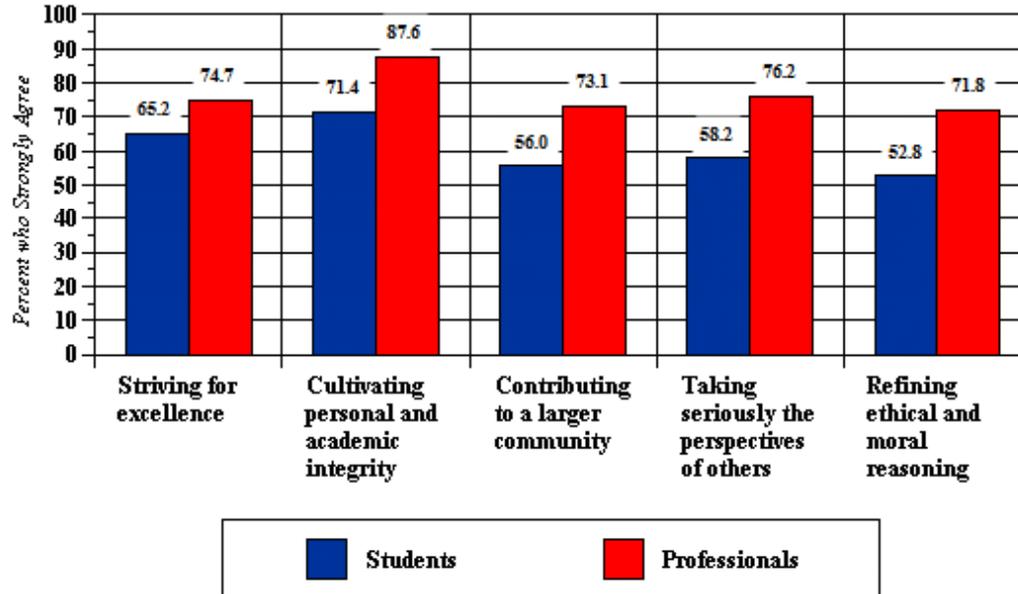
- ▶ Across the board, students, faculty, administrators, and student affairs staff on the 23 campuses believe that personal and social responsibility should be a major focus of attention at their own college or university.
- ▶ Despite the perceived value of attending to these issues, all surveyed groups reported that their campuses were not focusing enough attention on issues of personal and social responsibility.

**FINDING 1:**      **Across all categories, students and campus professionals strongly agree that personal and social responsibility should be a major focus of a college education.**

- More than 50% of the respondents said they “strongly agree” that each of the five dimensions should be a major focus at their institutions (see Figure 1). When the “strongly agree” and “agree somewhat” responses are combined, there is a nearly universal consensus (92 – 99%) that these dimensions should be a major focus of a college education.
- Among the five dimensions, cultivating personal and academic integrity received the most support, with 70% of students and 90% of campus professionals indicating that they “strongly agree” that it should be an important institutional focus.
- Among constituent groups, a higher percentage of the campus professionals – made up of faculty, student affairs staff, and academic administrators – were more strongly convinced than students that each of the five dimensions should be a major focus at their institutions.

Figure 1: Strong Agreement for Focusing on Personal and Social Responsibility

*Should Be a Major Focus*



**FINDING 2:** Across all groups surveyed, far fewer individuals agreed that personal and social responsibility was currently a major focus on their campus. There is a clear gap between what they perceive “should be” and what “is.”

Despite the strong agreement about the value of focusing on personal and social responsibility, the PSRII respondents were substantially more critical about whether their campuses are actually focusing enough on these issues. (See Figure 2.) The difference between “should be” and “is currently” dropped more than 50% in some areas of personal and social responsibility. When the “strongly agree” and “agree somewhat” responses are combined, the contrast between “should be” and “is currently” diminishes.

- With regard to striving for excellence, for example, only 4 out of 10 students, and 3 out of 10 campus professionals, said they “strongly agree” that their campuses made this dimension a major focus.
- Perceptions of the current institutional focus across the different dimensions vary depending upon the group surveyed. Among campus professionals, academic administrators and student affairs staff were more likely to “strongly agree” that their institutions are making the five dimensions a major focus, compared to faculty, who were slightly more critical on the topic. Among students, first-year students tended to have the most positive views of the institutional focus on the five dimensions, with a steady decrease by class year. (See Figure 3 for results associated with personal and academic integrity, which was the most strongly endorsed dimension generally.)

Figure 2: Perceptions of Current Focus on Personal and Social Responsibility

*Currently is a Major Focus*

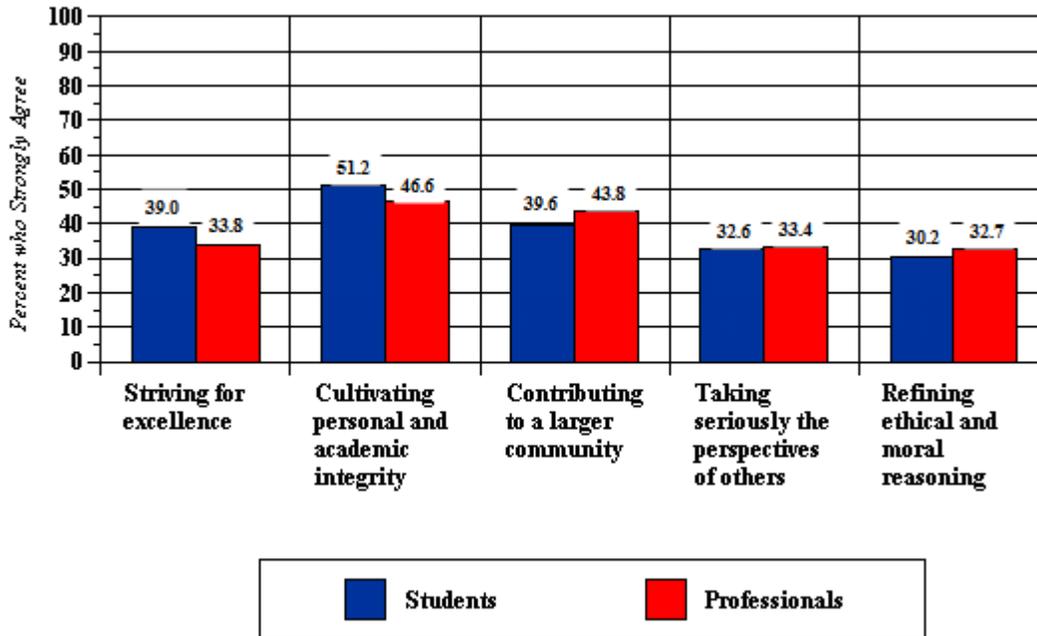
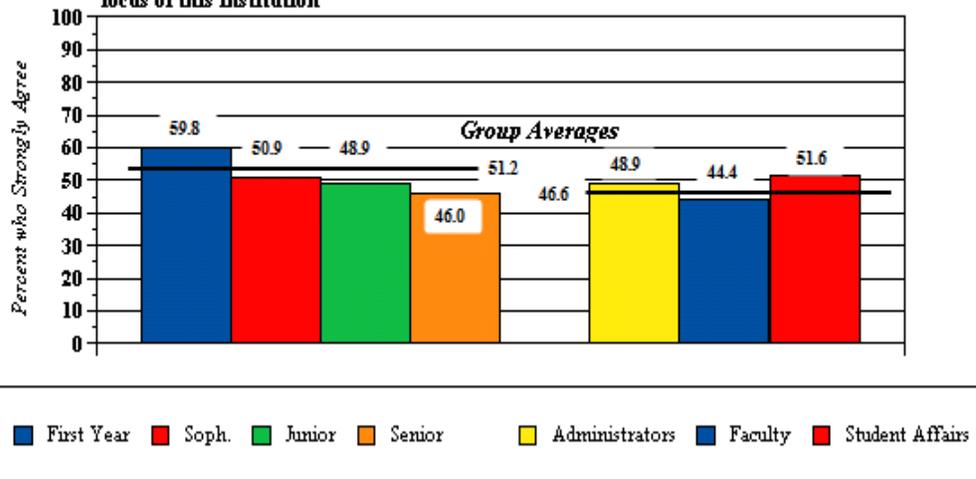


Figure 3: Group Differences in Perceptions Regarding Personal Integrity

*Currently is a Major Focus*

Helping students develop a strong sense of personal and academic integrity is a major focus of this institution



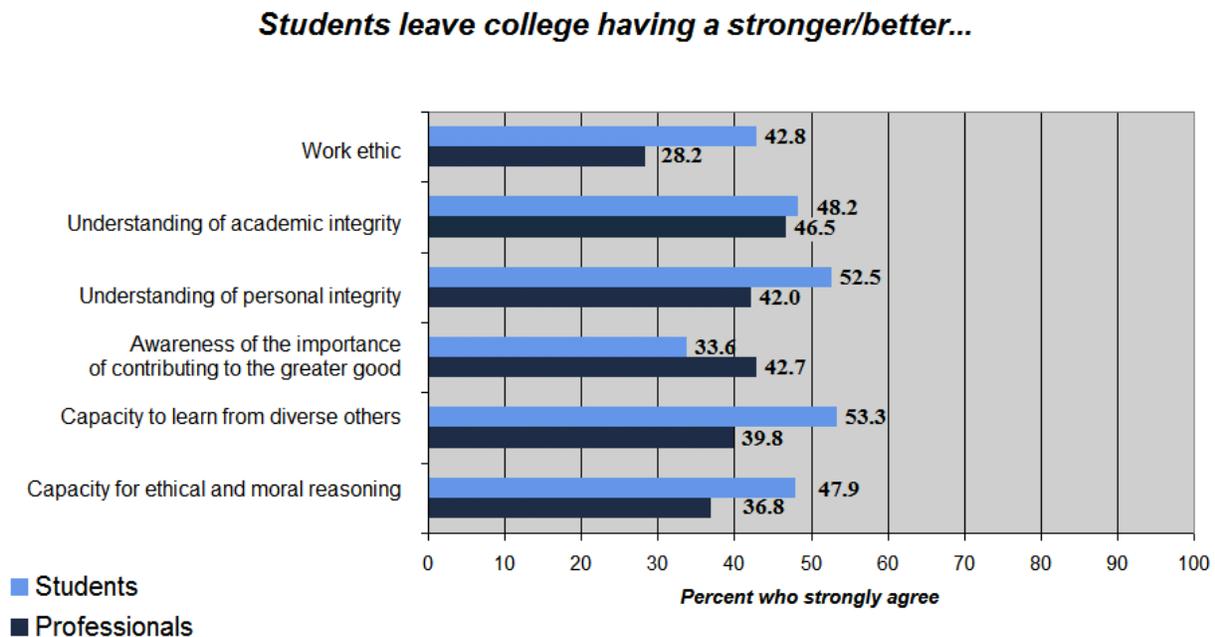
**FINDING 3:** Across all groups, significant numbers—but not a majority—of students and professionals alike think that students leave college having become stronger across various dimensions of personal and social responsibility during college.

College campuses generally, and those specifically selected to participate in the Core Commitments Leadership Consortium, do have many programs in place to educate students for personal and social responsibility, but these data show that there is substantial room for expansion and improvement of these efforts. Given this reality, the PSRII also examined whether students and campus professionals believe that students are making strides in developing various aspects of their personal and social responsibility.

- The PSRI Inventory shows that some students report that they grow in terms of personal and social responsibility during college as shown in Figure 4. More than 40% of students viewed themselves as having developed over the course of college in all areas except contributing to a larger community.
- Campus professionals also noted some growth among students but not as much as students perceived having gained.

The data raises the question that if institutions can close the gap between “should be” and “is currently,” might the student gains climb to even higher numbers?

**Figure 4. Perception that Students Leave College Having Become Stronger Across These Dimensions**



## Conclusion

Campus climate surveys are vital to examining the “real” vs. the “ideal” view of campus environments. The findings presented from the PSRII are intended to encourage dialogue about the five dimensions. Students, campus professionals, and higher education leaders can then explore together contrasting perceptions and areas of strong agreement in an effort to enhance opportunities for students to cultivate a commitment to excellence and integrity, to engage across differences on and off campus, and to develop moral discernment and action in their public and private lives.

The data provided by the PSRII is institutionally focused and intended to help campus leaders identify what they can do to enhance awareness of existing programs and perceptions, and to fill gaps in current practices in order to develop a more coherent and pervasive institutional climate suitable for educating students for personal and social responsibility.

There is a great deal more consensus about how much is offered on campus when "strongly agree" is combined with "somewhat agree," which raises an important question for the field: "Is 'somewhat agree' good enough?"

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*The report was prepared by the University of Michigan’s Core Commitments Research Group—Mary Antonaros, Cassie Barnhardt, Matthew Holsapple, Karen Moronski, and Veronica Vergoth, under the direction of Eric L. Dey.*

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*For more information on Core Commitments, please visit [www.aacu.org/core\\_commitments](http://www.aacu.org/core_commitments).*

## **Appendix A.**

### **The Core Commitments Leadership Consortium**

Twenty-three institutions from across all sectors of higher education comprise the Core Commitments Leadership Consortium, which is designed to bring together the most promising institutional practices related to educating students for personal and social responsibility as well as to deepen and extend these efforts. Chosen on the basis of work already accomplished and on an articulated plan to deepen and extend that work, these institutions were selected from a pool of more than 125 applicants in 2007.

The Leadership Consortium members are:

Allegheny College, Pennsylvania  
Babson College, Massachusetts  
Bowling Green State University, Ohio  
California State University, Northridge, California  
Concordia College – Moorhead, Minnesota  
Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania  
Miami University, Ohio  
Michigan State University, Michigan  
Middlesex Community College, Massachusetts  
Oakland Community College, Michigan  
Portland State University, Oregon  
Rollins College, Florida  
Sacred Heart University, Connecticut  
Saint Anselm College, New Hampshire  
Saint Mary’s College of California, California  
St. Lawrence University, New York  
United States Air Force Academy, Colorado  
United States Military Academy, New York  
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Alabama  
University of Central Florida, Florida  
University of the Pacific, California  
Wagner College, New York  
Winthrop University, South Carolina

## Appendix B: Background material

### The Five Dimensions of Personal and Social Responsibility

AAC&U has identified five key dimensions of personal and social responsibility that form the core of the PSRII:

1. **Striving for excellence:** developing a strong work ethic and consciously doing one's very best in all aspects of college;
2. **Cultivating personal and academic integrity:** recognizing and acting on a sense of honor, ranging from honesty in relationships to principled engagement with a formal academic honors code;
3. **Contributing to a larger community:** recognizing and acting on one's responsibility to the educational community and the wider society, locally, nationally, and globally;
4. **Taking seriously the perspectives of others:** recognizing and acting on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engaging diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work;
5. **Developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning:** developing ethical and moral reasoning in ways that incorporate the other four responsibilities; using such reasoning in learning and in life.

While these five dimensions do not encompass all aspects of conscience and citizenship, they offer a compelling claim as the initial focus for a widespread reengagement with campus values and ethics.

### PSRII Methodology

Supported by a grant from the Templeton Foundation, the initial inventory was developed in 2006 under the direction of Lee Knefelkamp and Richard Hersh with research assistance from Lauren Ruff. The survey items were carefully designed to measure aspects of a campus climate that are related to each of the five dimensions. This work began with a thorough review of the psychology and developmental literatures to clarify the definitions identify character traits, and relevant behavioral manifestations of each of the dimensions. Building upon the established definitions, the climate/ congruence/ dissonance literatures were examined to identify reasonable markers for each dimension, with the goal of establishing ten markers each with five examples. A multifaceted sampling strategy was devised to survey four different constituents: students, faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs staff. This approach provided comprehensive data regarding how well institutions are embedding education for civic and moral responsibility. The initial inventory was then refined in cooperation with Eric L. Dey and his associates at the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan. In the Fall of 2007 data were gathered from 23 schools participating in the *Core Commitments* and yielded responses of sufficient size and variety to be representative of the four populations on participating campuses. The overall survey response rates were 28% for the student survey and 47% for the professional surveys, and were statistically adjusted to account for bias in response patterns. However, since the project design did not randomly select institutions to participate in the *Core Commitments* effort the *overall* sample is not representative of the four populations nationally.

## A Note about the Data

Campus climate data is *self-reported data* that focuses on participants' *perceptions* of the campus environment. It does not capture what an institution is *actually doing* with regard to the phenomena under investigation. The PSRII results **may point to:** (a) a lack of *awareness* about existing programs and practices related to personal and social responsibility, (b) a lack of *impact* of these programs and practices on the overall institutional culture, or (c) actual *gaps* in programs and practices. The Leadership Consortium institutions are using their own data to probe the situation on their individual campuses.

Because campuses differ dramatically in terms of mission, culture, size, and population, this report does not compare data across individual institutions. Hence, the data is reported *in the aggregate* across the 23 schools. The data is disaggregated where relevant by factors such as students' year in school, for example, or by professional category (faculty, student affairs staff, and academic administrators). To better highlight comparisons with student responses, several graphs combine faculty, student affairs staff, and academic administrators into a single professional category when differences across these groupings are modest.