

February 2005

Virtue In Action

College All-Stars Work to Better Our World

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FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

You may have heard the expression of “grades aren’t everything”. This expression is true because getting good grades may be viewed as just the beginning. How we use our intelligence, and the knowledge that comes from our school work, is what really counts. Last week, 20 college students were chosen by USA Today for the All-USA College Academic team, to honor not only their academic excellence, but also their generosity in using their knowledge and talents to improve the lives of others. In this lesson we will take a close look as at the work of some of our nation’s college all stars, and examine how they have chosen to serve our local, national and international communities.

The 16th Annual All-USA Team

Qualifying for the team is no easy task. Ten men and ten women were chosen from 602 students across the nation. Their ages range from 19 to 26, and their majors range from music to engineering, yet their stories share some similarities. An average GPA of 3.86 is proof of a rigorous academic discipline. And these grades weren’t won by months of shutting themselves away with their books. All of the all-star students are involved in other activities such as sports, choir, clubs, and volunteer organizations.

Each all-star received trophies and an award of \$2,500. Many of them are just beginning to dream of what the future will hold as they graduate from college and move on to change the world.

Service to the Local Community: Pablo Durana & Caesar Garcia

Pablo Durana, a 21-year-old business and communications major noticed a problem when he went to the campus cafeteria at the University of North Carolina. The students and the cafeteria workers complained about each other, but they never actually spoke to each other. Pablo began to feel empathy for the workers when he noticed that many of them did not know how to speak English, and so couldn’t communicate effectively with the students. A native of Colombia whose family lives in Quebec, Pablo is trilingual and understands how helpless you can feel when you cannot speak the language of the people around you. Pablo decided to do something to help.

First Pablo designed a program called the Carolina Language Partnership to address the problem. The program matches students as one-on-one tutors for cafeteria workers who want to learn English. Pablo then won a \$1,500 scholarship to start the program. Pablo discussed the program in the USA Today all-star article.

“Tutoring the immigrants one to one gives UNC students a window into the lives of the workers, many of whom work multiple low-wage jobs, he says. The program also makes the workers see students in a different light. “Most are responsible, but it only takes a couple of students to make their job harder by leaving trash on the floor and not putting their trays away,” he says. Having students volunteering to tutor them helps the workers see not all students are that bad, he says. “It brings the community closer together.” “The volunteers (also) learn to appreciate the employees so it’s not only beneficial for the people being taught, it’s also beneficial for the (student) teachers.” It’s clear that Pablo’s language partnership is not only helping immigrant s learn English, but has also helped to build a true sense of solidarity between the university workers and students.

Students have also learned to respect the perseverance of the university workers in striving to learn English. “A lot of the time, there’s only one earner taking care of six family members. What makes it incredible is the time they take to learn English,” Durana says. “Teaching people eager to learn despite so many obstacles make it a deeper experience for students as well, he says.” It makes teaching so much easier, and so much more fun.”

Caesar Garcia represented his country as a diver in the Athens Olympics, and still managed to keep his grades above average. As an athlete, he noticed that many times sports players were painted in a bad light, from media stories that focused on the negative incidents, or just from the fact that athletes often don’t have the time for community service.

As the oldest of seven children, leadership came naturally to Caesar, and he used this to recruit the help of other athletes for a project he had in mind. At a local elementary school, he started a character education program based on NCAA “Life Skills”, forming his

own lesson plans to teach virtues to the students. His father, a gymnastics coach, had taught by example that forming children well is more important than making money. “If you can teach a child success, you’ve taught him a lesson for life,” said Garcia. It was a challenge to get all the athletes to help him, but he was motivated by a strong desire to help children learn the character traits that would help them to succeed.

Service to the Nation: Aaron Tang

Aaron is a Yale senior who plans to change the world through education. As a political science major, he is not only looking to go into the government, but also to enable students to govern their own lives and their education. He realizes that good citizenship is lived out in the ordinary, daily routine and the way in which students take responsibility for their own education. Aaron has seen that many times the students themselves have good ideas about how to improve their schools, but they need the chance to share their opinions and to do something to better their situations.

He is not waiting, however, to graduate from college in order to put his plans into action. Aaron raised \$50,000 to found an organization called “Our Education”, which promotes giving students a voice in their K-12 education. Our Education publishes a student-written magazine, has an online forum, and works to get high school student representation on school boards.

Reaching Out to the Global Community: Scott Erwin & Rachel Husfeld

Scott Erwin put his senior year at the University of Richmond on hold in order to promote democracy in the Iraq. Scott designed an educational program called Ambassadors of Democracy, a 15-lesson curriculum teaching the principles of democracy. Scott then went to Iraq for the 2003-2004 school year, working with Iraqi students and professors to start the program. At that time Iraq was, and still is an extremely dangerous place for Americans. Scott demonstrated great courage, both in accepting the risk that he was taking and in putting his beliefs into practice.

On June 2, 2004 after teaching a class, the danger of Scott’s mission became all too real as Scott’s car was attacked by insurgents. The ambush left two of his Iraqi friends dead. Scott himself was shot four times, and was saved from a bullet to the chest by an extra AAA battery for his MP3 player, that he was carrying in his chest pocket.

Both of his military grandfathers instilled in Scott the values of service and sacrifice. Before serving in Baghdad, Scott created a group where veterans taught these values and civic responsibility to inner-city students. He was motivated to go to Iraq to teach about democracy and freedom, because he knew these ideas would be more powerful than any army tank. “Doing anything in Iraq is a test of perseverance,” he says, as he recalls the task of finding funding, and gathering Iraqi students who were willing to risk being attacked because of their desire to learn about democracy.

The key for Scott was knowing not only the value of democracy, but the responsibility and limitations that come with it, and trying to be sensitive to the needs of the people rather than enforce his own desires. “It is more important to listen than talk, and then determine how best to offer expertise,” he explained. Now recovering in the United States, Erwin continues to study while advising the Iraqi ambassador to the United Nations. He was set back by his wounds, but not stopped in his fight for freedom. Scott was awarded the Defense of Freedom medal, and plans to work in future democracy-building programs.

Rachel Husfeld of Valparaiso University is an “Engineer without Borders”. As chapter president of this organization, she embodies the ideal of taking her education outside of the borders of the classroom, and using it to improve the lives of others. When she went with her church to work in Mexico, it touched her heart to see so many people in desperate need and made her think of more ways to help them. “I feel like I’ve been blessed with so much,” she observed, “I have the resources and the passion to be able to help.”

Rachel noticed that it is easy to be an engineering student who does nothing but engineering, but from early on she took steps to make sure her mind was not confined within the classroom. She learned Spanish, reflected on what life is really about, and actively thought of ways to serve with the resources she has. “I have a passion for other cultures.” She found support in her church and family, both financially and emotionally.

The opportunities began to come to her, and she chose to take them. Once you take hold of an opportunity, she explained, it requires hard work to see it through, to practice teamwork with the others, and to persevere beyond the frustrations. Her group is currently working on a three-year project to design and install a windmill-powered well and drip irrigation system in Kenya. She is

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also participating in a third construction project in Mexico. For Rachel, service for others is not something extra, rather it is an integral part of who she is. In her own words, “I have a heart for the people.”

The college academic all-star team demonstrates that by excelling in our schoolwork, we can gain the knowledge and confidence to more effectively help others in need. At times our school work may seem boring or overly difficult. During these times it would be good to remember some of the college all-stars and how they use their education to help others in creative and effective ways. We also don't have to wait for college. Today and right now we are all learning things that can help improve the lives of others. It is up to us to find these opportunities and to then decide to be generous with the knowledge and talents we have been given. ■

Notes.....

Vocabulary

Citizenship – The status of a citizen with respect to his duties, rights, and privileges; and having the desire to improve his state, country, and global community.

Compassion – Feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help.

Courage – The capacity to meet danger without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one's convictions; to be willing to put one's opinions into practice.

Discipline – Training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior; especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.

Empathy – Entering into the feelings or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation.

Generosity – Freely giving of our time, talent and resources.

Hope – To wish for something with the expectation of its fulfillment.

Leadership – To inspire and motivate others in their conduct; to play a guiding role.

Perseverance – Trying hard and continuously, despite obstacles and difficulties.

Responsibility – Accepting and meeting the demands of our chosen duty in life. Being accountable for our actions.

Solidarity – A shared common interest; active loyalty within a group.

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Lesson Goals

- ▶ Develop awareness of the gifts we have, a sense of appreciation for these gifts, and a realization of how we can use our gifts of talents, knowledge and time for the benefit of others
- ▶ Develop a sense of appreciation for the value of school in helping us to gain knowledge that empowers us and can help us help others
- ▶ Foster empathy and compassion for others in need
- ▶ Encourage a sense of citizenship in the context of our duty to better our local communities, national community and global community
- ▶ Encourage students to establish goals and strive to achieve their potential
- ▶ Help students to recognize the virtues that will enable them to achieve goals: perseverance, discipline / hard work, often support and encouragement from others

Discussion Question Options

1. In our community, do we take the time to observe the needs of others we come into contact with on a regular basis? How did Pablo Durano do this? Do we have any similar situations in our school or local communities?
2. Caesar Garcia faced the challenge of trying to convince other college athletes to participate in his character education program. Pablo Durano also faced this challenge for the language program. What leadership qualities do you think were likely required for Caesar and Pablo to succeed in convincing other athletes and students to participate in their programs?
Discussion Tips (if necessary):
 - **DEFINING A VISION to potential participants; a vision of both a need that would be worthy of their efforts, and a vision for an effective means of addressing the need.**
 - **BELIEVING IN THE VISION; Pablo and Caesar were likely successful in attracting others to help in that they believe firmly in the work they are doing. This type of earnestness is attractive to others**
 - **EFFECTIVENESS IN ORGANIZING; Developing the details of planned programs and implementing the plan**
3. Pablo's language program helped to establish a sense of solidarity between the students providing the assistance and the workers receiving the assistance. How would you define solidarity? Let's talk about situations where we have helped others, or have received assistance from others, and a sense of solidarity was established?
Discussion Tip: it doesn't have to occur from a formal program; examples can also come from helping friend and even family members.
4. What do you think about Aaron Tang's proposal to place high school students on school boards? How could we implement this idea in our school? Which students would be chosen and on what basis? Would students have a vote or simply be present as an observer, and participant in discussions.
5. What are some examples of how we already help others, either family, friends, within our local community, school, church, or even helping people in other nations?
6. Do you ever think that the classes you have now will be useful in helping others? What are some ways that we can dedicate ourselves to serve with the education we have received? How can you use your math to help others? Science? History? English? Other classes?
7. Many of these students did not plan far in advance the ways that they were going to serve others. They just went with some needs that they observed, and then solutions they were naturally interested in. What needs do we observe in our local community,

our nation and country? Let's also include things that every person needs, no matter where they come from and how much money they have? What are some of the ways we could help with our talents, time and resources?

8. Many times when we have to get up early for school, or work on homework, it is hard to see education as a privilege. What are the "riches" that we get from education that we would be deprived of if we were not in school?
9. What happens if you have a lot of talents, but no generosity? What kind of person would you be?

Journal Writing Options

1. What are your goals for the future? Imagine yourself in 15 years, and describe what your life will be like. How do your goals relate to helping other people?
2. Write about the one need you would like most to address. Describe the need in detail, your plan for addressing the need, and the talents, time and / or resources you could devote toward addressing the need. Also include a description of the challenges you will encounter in trying to address the need. Finally, write out a specific timetable for beginning the project. Remember that the need you focus on can be as local as within your own family or as distant as a need in a foreign country.

Extension Projects

1. Ask students to read the USA Today profiles of the 20 all-star members and choose their favorite. Students can then write an explanation of why they chose their favorite all-star. In groups of three, they can explain to each other why they admire the different team members.
2. Imagine that you are holding an academic all-star competition in your own school. On the board, come up with a list of attributes that would be important for the winner to have, and define them (What kind of grades, what extra-curricular activities, any specific characteristics?). Advanced classes can actually organize this competition, designing an application form with specific questions, picking judges, and arranging for school-wide recognition of the winners.
3. Enlist the help of parents to organize a class service trip where students can be with needy people in a concrete and obvious way (soup kitchen, children's hospital, nursing home, etc.).

4. Divide students into groups of four. Give each group a newspaper article which of medium length. Students read the article and try to identify the needs of the people involved. On a sheet of paper, they list all of the characters or groups that are involved in some way in the story. Under each character, they think of all the possible needs that person has. The students put a star by one of the needs that they could help solve. Together they think of a project proposal (hypothetical) that would address the need.

Web Resources

Profiles of College Academic All-star Team:

<http://mostviewednews.orb6.com/stories/usatoday/20050217/2005collegeacademicallstarsfirstteam.php>

Our Education Program:

<http://our-education.org/>

NCAA Life Skills:

http://www1.ncaa.org/membership/ed_outreach/champs-life_skills/index.html

Engineers without Borders:

<http://www.ewb-usa.org/>

Bridges to Community:

<http://www.bridgestocommunity.org/>

College Matters:

<http://www.collegematters.org/>

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