

Educating for Leadership

By John Yeager

A fitting metaphor for the challenging realities of adolescent ethical decision-making is the “rider on the elephant.” Jon Haidt, professor of moral psychology at the University of Virginia, sees the rider as logic, the reasoning mind, and the elephant as emotion. The rider helps steer, but despite all the pulling of the reins, the stronger elephant may decide the course. When the rider can control the elephant, it means that appropriate decisions are guided and controlled by using the positive emotions of joy, contentment, awe and elevation, gratitude, and love, or the negative emotions of fear, anger, disgust, shame, and guilt.

Character strengths can assist the rider in controlling the elephant’s evolutionary urges. Aristotle identified six states of character in humans. Brutishness (almost pre-human, wanton irresponsibility), defective character (self-indulgence), and weakness of will (incontinence) are lower level states that resemble the control of the elephant. Strength of will and character excellence are correlates to the mature rider. Heroic virtue is the sixth state. The greatest tension in adolescents tends to be between acting with weakness of will and acting with strength of will. A student acting out of weakness of will wants to act virtuously and honorably, but is unsuccessful. A student acting on strength of will succeeds in the making the moral decision through great effort. The elephant wants the reins, but the rider is eventually successful in the effort. When students are able to make the moral decision without great effort, then they have arrived at Aristotle’s level of “character excellence.”

Students who aspire to strength of will and character excellence can call upon their character strengths to support them in making wise decisions. Knowing what particular traits look like when they come alive can be instructive. Nansoon Park and Chris Peterson, leading researchers in character strengths in youth, claim that “being able to put a name to what one does well is intriguing and even empowering.” Each student has a unique set of higher (often called “signature”) strength combinations that, in concert, are uniquely valuable to his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior. This set may include strengths such as creativity, persistence, integrity, vitality, fairness, humility, and gratitude.

At Culver Academy, all students complete the Values in Action-Youth inventory, a 198-item psychometrically validated test that identifies strengths of character. The VIA identifies 24 ubiquitous character strengths, each fitting into one of six categories. By knowing, valuing, and acting on their own strengths, students are more attentive to performance traits such as diligence, perseverance, and self-discipline, and to how they co-mingle with the relational strengths of integrity, justice, caring, and respect. Imagine students having a list of the 24 best things about themselves! Imagine further that by learning about these strengths, they can better engage others by appealing to their strengths.

With a tool box of strengths, student leaders can ask themselves the following questions:

- What are my strengths? How do I know they are my strengths?
- How often and under what circumstances do I get to exercise my strengths?
- How can I increase opportunities to use and develop these strengths in working with other students?
- What are my most powerful strength combinations?
- How can I use these “teams” of strengths to develop my leadership skills?

By learning about character strengths and ways to build and apply them, student leaders can be guided to acknowledge, own, and apply their own strengths for themselves and others. ■

