



CHARACTER & EQUITY FOR FLOURISHING COMMUNITIES

2025 KPCEL Conference

Fostering character development to reimagine education.

March 3 - 5, 2025

The Peabody Hotel

149 Union Ave, Memphis, TN 38103



Welcome

Dear KPCEL,

Welcome to the KPCEL 2025 Annual Conference: Character & Equity for Flourishing Communities.

This year's theme invites us to reflect on how character and equity intersect to create the conditions for communities to flourish. Together, we'll explore how centering these principles in our work strengthens the foundation for meaningful, lasting change in the schools and communities we serve.

With over fifty carefully curated sessions, this year's program is designed to inspire reflection, spark dialogue, and provide practical strategies for advancing equity and character formation. From interactive workshops to engaging keynote addresses, these sessions draw from the collective wisdom of the KPCEL network.

Thank you for your continued commitment to this growing community. Your dedication and engagement are helping shape the future of education and leadership. We hope this conference leaves you inspired and energized to lead with purpose and authenticity.

Enjoy the conference!

KPCEL Steering Committee



KPCEL VISION & MISSION

Vision: Fostering character development to reimagine education

Mission: We empower educational partners to build a symbiotic relationship between research, theory, and practice that advances character development, practical wisdom, and human flourishing

AGENDA



DAY 1

Monday, March 3rd

- 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. **Registration Open**
- 9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. **Optional: Visit to the National Civil Rights Museum**
National Civil Rights Museum
- 5:00 - 6:00 p.m. **Welcome Reception**
The Skyway, Rooftop Level (S)
- 6:00 - 8:15 p.m. **Dinner**
- 7:15 - 8:00 p.m. **Keynote - Roots of Resilience: The Unbroken Spirit of the African American Community**
Dr. Mike Brown, *The Principal Learning Center*
The Skyway, Rooftop Level (S)

DAY 2

Tuesday, March 4th

- 7:30 - 8:30 a.m. **Breakfast**
Hernando Desoto Room, Mezzanine Level
- 8:35 - 8:45 a.m. **Opening Remarks**
Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level
- 8:45 - 9:45 a.m. **Keynote - Cultivating Thriving Communities: Reimagining Educational Spaces Through the Lens of Dignity**
Dr. Beth-Sarah Wright, *Thrive With Dignity*
Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level
- 10:00 - 10:45 a.m. **Breakout Sessions I**
Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level
Workshop - Transforming School Leadership: Cultivating Equity and Wellbeing through Character Education
Dr. Melinda Bier, Dr. Fatima Salas-Rodriguez, and Anastasia Hercules, University of Missouri-St. Louis
Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC
Presentation 1 - Navigating Challenging Conversations: Can Cultivating Civic Virtue Advance (or Undermine) Equity?
Dr. Matthew Post, University of Tulsa

Presentation 2 - Embracing Voices: Cultivating Diversity and Inclusion Through Dialogue
Dr. Jane Cobia and Dr. Kara Chism, Samford University

AGENDA



10:00 - 10:45 a.m.

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop - Exploring Virtue Based Leadership in Ethical Decision Making

Dr. Lance Forman and Dr. Robin Cayce, Lipscomb University

Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PEEC

Presentation 1 - Focusing on Character Leads to Success for One Marginalized Community

Dr. Ben White, Dr. Brenda Mendiola, Dr. Darlene Atkins, Casey Dykes, University of Alabama

Presentation 2 - Toward a Character Education Approach to Teaching about Race in the U.S.

Barbara Whitlock, Montrose School

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Roundtables: Roundtables run simultaneously in two 20-minute segments. Choose a table, engage, then switch to another table for a new discussion.

Assessing the Additive Value of Character Skills in Diverse Student Populations

Dr. Jake Plantz, Enrollment Management Association

Combating Isolation through Continuous Learning and Coaching Opportunities for Rural Leaders

Dr. Mary Sult, Dr. Denise Schares and Amanda Schimdt, University of Northern Iowa

Doing “Good Work” Together: Insights and Puzzles from a Member-Driven Community of Practice Focused on Character

Daniel Mucinskas and Lynn Barendsen, Harvard University

Observing Student Learning Protocols: Advancing Equity and Character Formation Through Reflective Practice

Rochelle Van Dijk, Great MN Schools and Amy Nicholson, TNTF

Equity in Action: Culturally-Responsive Character Education for Thriving Schools

Dr. Kate Allman and Dr. Christina Richardson, Wake Forest University

11:00 - 11:45 a.m.

Breakout Sessions II

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Appreciative Tuning Protocol: Bridging Higher Ed and K-12 to Improve Character Integration

Dr. Teresa Foulger, Arizona State University

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - The Equity and Justice Academy in Character Education (EJACE): An immersive experience helping school communities create an equitable and just culture for ALL to flourish

Michael Barolak and Dr. Grace Lee, CharacterPlus

Presentation 2 - Exemplars of Justice: Supporting College Students’ Critical Consciousness Development through Cross-Institutional Engagement

Dr. Sara Etz Mendonça and Dr. Michael Lamb, Wake Forest University

AGENDA



11:00 - 11:45 a.m.

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop - Generous Listening and Dialogue for Character and Community Development

Dr. Jonathan Tirrell, Naomi Boase, and James Fisher, Tufts University

Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PEEC

Presentation 1 - Building a Just Community Through Virtue Storytelling

Bob Nardo, Dawn Bradley, and Emilie Rogers, Libertas School of Memphis

Presentation 2 - Forming a Flourishing Adult Culture to Sustain a Character- Driven K-12 Environment

Yetta Lewis and Bobbie Turner, Gestalt Community Schools

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Roundtables: Roundtables run simultaneously in two 20-minute segments. Choose a table, engage, then switch to another table for a new discussion.

Empowering School Communities to Make Ethical & Equitable Decisions

Dr. Maureen Spelman, North Central College

Character and Equity in Islamic Higher Education: The Case of Muhammadiyah University, Indonesia

Erpin Said, University of Rochester

Rooted in Dignity: Cultivating Character and Equity for Flourishing School Communities

Yeime Valle, Michael Carbone, and Jolleen Wagner, Brilla Schools/ Seton Education Partners

Character at the Core: Integrating Character Formation and Equity into Institutional Culture

Emily Farkas and Sean Sullivan, Grand Canyon University

Engaging Minds: Leveraging Neurotechnology and AI Integration for Equitable and Character-Driven Education

Adma Gama-Krummel and Caitlin Sharp, University of Rochester

Erpin Said's Roundtable Canceled

12:00 - 1:00 p.m.

Lunch

The Skyway, Rooftop Level (S)

1:15 - 2:00 p.m.

Breakout Sessions III

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Human Canopy: Exploring Identity and Equity Amongst Students

Dr. Ashley Brandon and Emily Farkas, Grand Canyon University

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Self Determination Theory Perspectives on Equity and Character Education

Dr. Randall Curren and Sieun Park, University of Rochester

Presentation 2 - Choosing Connection Over Conflict: A Case Study of Bridging Differences in Order to Build Community

Dr. Stacy Schmauss, and Dr. Cheraton Love, Wake Forest University

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop - Character and Equity Through a Sociocultural Approach in Education

Dr. Elena Sada, Boston College

Session Canceled

AGENDA



1:15 - 2:00 p.m.

Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PEEC

Presentation 1 - Leading Flourishing Schools: A Curriculum Case Study

Dr. Michael Hahn, Diane Moeller, and Sasha Kuznetsov, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota

Presentation 2 - Character in Context: Reflections on How to Fit Character to Institution from ECI Grantees

Cristy Guleserian, Arizona State University; Dr. Heather Keith, Radford University; Dr. Juliette Ratchford, Wake Forest University; Glenn McMillan, Medgar Evers College - CUNY; and Dr. Michael Lamb, Wake Forest University

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Roundtables: Roundtables run simultaneously in two 20-minute segments. Choose a table, engage, then switch to another table for a new discussion.

Integrating Character Assessment in the Redesign of a More Equitable College Admission System

David Hawkins, National Association for College Admission Counseling

Student Flourishing in the Age of AI

Susan Morrissey, Boston College and Dr. Christina Richardson, Wake Forest University

Teaching How to Manifest Character in Educational Leadership Professional Practices

Dr. Kathleen King, North Central College

Character and Equity Through Entrepreneurship: Embodiment and Entrepreneurship

Dr. Kerri Cissna, Miami University and Dr. Anna-Katharina Lenz, Miami University

Social Entrepreneurship: You're Doing It Without Even Realizing

Megan Smith, John W. Altman Institute for Entrepreneurship, and Amber Peskin, Butler Behavioral Health

2:15 - 3:45 p.m.

Panel & Community Activity: Making & Monitoring Progress Toward Character & Equity for Flourishing Communities

Moderator: Dr. Martin Scanlan

Panel: Dr. Jamie Brunson, University of Memphis; Deanna Flores, Voices College-Bound Language Academies; Kerrie Jackson, Gestalt Community Schools; and Jolleen Wagner, Brilla Schools Network

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

3:45 - 4:00 p.m.

Closing Remarks & Raffle Drawing for the Marching of the Ducks

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

4:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Break

4:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Optional: Marching of the Ducks, a Peabody Tradition

Lobby Level Fountain

5:00 - 6:15 p.m.

Cocktail Reception

The Skyway, Rooftop Level (S)

6:15 p.m.

Dinner

The Skyway, Rooftop Level (S)

AGENDA



DAY 3

Wednesday, March 5th

7:30 - 8:30 a.m.

Breakfast

Hernando Desoto Room, Mezzanine Level

8:40 - 9:00 a.m.

Opening Remarks & Book Raffle Drawings

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

9:15 - 10:00 a.m.

Breakout Sessions IV

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Empowering Educators for Equity and Flourishing through Wellbeing

Anastasia Hercules, University of Missouri-St. Louis

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Advancing Equity, Developing Character Through Innovation

Carolyn Chandler, Strategic School Leadership and Josh Densen, Next Chapter Coaching

Presentation 2 - All In: Novel Strategies for Adult Character Formation

Kelsey LaVigne, Figment Solutions

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop - Building Thriving Educational Communities: Integrating Character, Equity, and Leadership Through Principled Innovation

Megan Hennessy, Arizona State University; Dr. Jennifer Brown Urban and Elyse Postlewaite, Montclair State University

Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - A Culture of Character for All Schools

Elizabeth Huntley, Hope Institute; Latoya Seals, Cornerstone Schools of Alabama; Dr. Gregory Moore, Springville High School; and Dr. Darlene Atkins, Tuscaloosa City Schools

Presentation 2 - Designing Schools that Center Character and Equity

Rebecca Feiden, BES; Dr. Brenda Jones, Invictus Nashville Charter School; and Nolan McDaniel, Chattacademy Community School

AGENDA



9:15 - 10:00 a.m.

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Roundtables: Roundtables run simultaneously in two 20-minute segments. Choose a table, engage, then switch to another table for a new discussion.

Using Emoji to Strengthen Character Development and Joyful Learning in Early Childhood Education

with Waode Eti Hardiyanti, University of Rochester

Fostering Ethical Citizens: A Professional Development on Cultures of Character for School Leaders

with Dr. Rob Williams, Arkansas State University

NGOs As Moral Models of Ethical Leadership

with Robert Bandoni, Students Shoulder to Shoulder and Dr. Karambu Ringera, International Peace Initiatives

Cultivating Communities of Character: Building Flourishing Faculty in K-12 Schools

with Natalie Demers, Jabulani

10:15 - 11:00 a.m.

Breakout Sessions V

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Fostering High Regard through Head, Heart, and Hands for Inclusive and Compassionate Education

Dr. Lori Doyle, Concordia University Irvine; Jolleen Wagner, Brilla Schools/Seton Education Partners; and Dr. Nancy Winfrey, Wake Forest University

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC.

Presentation 1 - Delivering a Personal Formation Experience with High School Students

Kerrie Jackson, Gestalt Community Schools and Dr. Tony Klemmer, Wisdom for Good

Presentation 2 - Practical Wisdom from a Research Practice Partnership: Promoting Equity, Character & Flourishing through School Leadership

Dr. Karen Bohlin, Harvard University; Dr. Andrea Mayfield, University of West Alabama; Tonya Starks, George P. Austin Middle School; and Dr. Luther Riley, Greensboro High School

International Room, 3rd Floor, PEEC

Workshop - Flourishing Begins with the Educators: Developing Faculty to Cultivate Student Success

Peter Anderson, Washington Latin Public Charter School

Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Rise by Rooting Down: Transformation Technology with Ethics and Professional Dispositions

Aleta Forkum, Western Governors University

Presentation 2 - Whose Virtues? Exploring Character Through Culturally Diverse Student Voices

Dr. Elyse Postlewaite, Elaine Les, Anglin Thevaraja, Yasmine Perry, Jaclyn Novak, Montclair State University

AGENDA



10:15 - 11:00 a.m.

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Roundtables: Roundtables run simultaneously in two 20-minute segments. Choose a table, engage, then switch to another table for a new discussion.

Embedding Values and Equity in Grammar Instruction: Saadi's Gulistan in Practice

with Somayyeh Ariyanfar, University of Rochester

Strategizing and Costing Household-Inclusive Restorative Programs for Character Formation in School Districts

with Arinze Amanekwe, University of Rochester

Use Polarity Mapping to Explore the Character and Equity Interaction

with Mary Menacho, Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS)

Student Voice as the Engine: Building Character and Equity Through Shared Power at DREAM Charter Schools.

with Kalila Hoggard and Sabrina Stavonor, DREAM Charter Schools

11:15 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.

KPCEL Community Activity & Closing Remarks

Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

12:15 pm

Lunch

Hernando Desoto Room, Mezzanine Level

A tremendous thank you to all of our presenters who have provided engaging, thoughtful insights on how character formation and equity are essential, interwoven components of thriving educational environments. We also appreciate the KPCEL community members that served on the Call for Papers Review Committee for curating such meaningful sessions.

A special thanks to our KPCEL Ambassadors for warmly welcoming attendees and being a resource for those new to our network.

Thank you to Dr. Jimmy Shaw for skillfully leading us through the program and creating a welcoming space for dialogue.

Most of all, thank you to each of you for your time, contributions, and unwavering commitment to character formation. Your dedication makes this gathering, and this community, possible.

We value your feedback!

Your feedback matters and helps to shape future KPCEL events and projects.



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Follow the KPCEL Community Page



KEYNOTE



DR. MIKE BROWN

Director, The Principal Learning Center

Dr. Mike Brown, a proud New Jersey native, a loving husband of 19 years, and a doting father of two preteens, has dedicated over 24 years to advocating for high-quality education in underserved communities. He holds a BA from Hampton University, a Master's from Boston College, and a Doctorate from Vanderbilt University, where he also serves as an Adjunct Professor. Dr. Brown's career began in the classroom as a middle school teacher, eventually progressing to the role of Principal, where he gained recognition for his success in leading school turnaround. As a former Chief Schools Officer, he supported a network of schools serving 2,000 students before serving as the Chief Schools Officer at New Schools For Alabama. Currently, Dr. Brown leads the Principal Learning Center (PLC) and continues to make a lasting impact on educational leadership and educational reform.

Roots of Resilience: The Unbroken Spirit of the African American Community

We gather here in Memphis at a sacred landmark of the Civil Rights Movement where we lived to tell the story of the resilience of the human spirit. Amidst centuries of racial oppression, the African American spirit has preserved and nurtured a rich legacy of character, values, and historical ways of knowing that continue to inspire a nation. Our opening session explores those ancestral belief systems and African American values of persistence that have become the foundation of what modern-day scholars and researchers identify as “resilience”. Together we’ll examine the unbreakable spirit of African Americans—how they have not only survived but thrived, forging new pathways of strength, identity, and cultural brilliance in America.

KEYNOTE



DR. BETH- SARAH WRIGHT

Founding Executive Director, Thrive With Dignity, LLC



Dr. Beth-Sarah Wright, an Atlanta-based author, dynamic speaker, and strategic thought partner, inspires and drives transformation in communities, institutions, and personal lives. Her impactful work addresses deep-rooted challenges, advocating for identity shifts and increased capacities to achieve lasting, meaningful change. Dr. Wright champions authenticity, striving to align aspirational identities with lived realities, all while centering human dignity. As the Co-Founder of Thrive With Dignity, LLC, Dr. Wright collaborates with organizations to foster authentic and thriving communities using the DIGNITY Lens©. She has authored seven influential books on various topics, from organizational integrity to depression and healing and spiritual growth. Dr. Wright most recently served as the director of enrollment management at Holy Innocents' Episcopal School in Atlanta, GA, the largest Episcopal parish school in the country, for 10 years. A former professor at NYU and Spelman College, she is an Adjunct Assistant Professor in Psychiatry at Emory School of Medicine. She holds a Ph.D. in Performance Studies from NYU, an MPhil in Anthropology from Cambridge University, and a BA in Sociology and Afro-American Studies from Princeton University.

Cultivating Thriving Communities: Reimagining Educational Spaces Through the Lens of Dignity

In her keynote address, Dr. Beth-Sarah Wright will reimagine the culture of educational spaces by centering human dignity. This address explores how fostering dignity nurtures character development, shapes authentic leadership, and aligns institutional practices with core values. More than an abstract ideal, dignity is presented as a teachable, actionable skill that can be integrated into curriculum, leadership behaviors, and the lived experiences of students and educators. With this dignity-centered lens, participants will be invited to cultivate thriving, authentic communities grounded in dignity, purpose, and integrity.

PANEL & COMMUNITY ACTIVITY



Making & Monitoring Progress Toward Character & Equity for Flourishing Communities

Many schools strive to integrate character values into the teaching and learning environment. Yet most of the time administrators and teachers lack data providing formative feedback on how well they are advancing these aims. This panel session and community activity examines strategies for addressing this challenge. In a series of whole group and small group activities, participants will reflect on making and monitoring progress toward the goal of character and equity for flourishing communities and how one tool - character walks - might help them improve.



DR. MARTIN SCANLAN

*Moderator
Boston College*

Dr. Martin Scanlan is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. Before joining the academy, Scanlan spent over ten years as a teacher and administrator. He primarily worked in urban settings in schools serving traditionally marginalized students in Washington, D.C., Berkeley, CA, and Madison, WI. This laid a foundation for his teaching and scholarship interests, which focus on how schools can be organized to more effectively welcome all. Scanlan's research primarily focuses on the organizational routines and practices of adults in schools, including the policies and procedures that shape these. While attending to multiple dimensions of diversity, his work has looked most carefully at how schools across sectors - including Catholic schools and public schools - can better serve students who have diverse cultural and linguistic heritages, as well as students with special needs. Scanlan has an extensive record of scholarship in academic journals reporting this work.

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DEANNA FLORES

Voices College-Bound Language Academies

Ms. Flores is the Chief Culture Officer of In Lak'Ech of Voices College-Bound Language Academies, a Charter Network of five dual-language immersion schools located across Santa Clara, San Joaquin and West Contra Costa Counties in Northern California serving underserved students. Ms. Flores is responsible for Network-wide Staff, Student and Parent/Guardian Culture and ensures consistency and alignment of Network Mission, Vision and Core Values. This includes oversight of Network-wide Character Education Development. In addition, Ms Flores oversees Human Resources and Fund Development. Ms. Flores sees her work with Voices staff, students, and the parent/guardian community as a tremendous privilege to serve communities that are reminiscent of the community she grew up in and wants to ensure these communities are given opportunities to thrive in a character-rich environment that further develops their cultural heritage and provides academic rigor.

PANEL



DR. JAMIE BRUNSDON

University of Memphis

Dr. Jamie Brunsdon is an Assistant Professor of Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy in the College of Health Sciences at the University of Memphis. His research interests broadly include the study of character development and human flourishing in the context of movement arenas, namely school physical education, youth sport, and elite sport.



JOLLEEN WAGNER

Brilla Schools Network

Jolleen Wagner is the Chief Mission & Advancement Officer for the Brilla Schools Network, where she has played a pivotal role in shaping its character education initiatives. Beginning as a 2nd-grade teacher, she spearheaded Brilla's Character Initiatives approach and later held leadership roles, including Chief Character Initiatives and Culture Officer and Chief Formation Officer. Her work has been instrumental in codifying Brilla's comprehensive character education model, emphasizing academic excellence and a life of deep meaning and purpose. With 20 years of experience in education, Jolleen started as a Lasallian Volunteer and teacher at San Miguel School in Chicago before serving as the Associate Director and Director of Lasallian Volunteers, overseeing faith-based education and social services programs. She has collaborated with the De La Salle Christian Brothers on faith formation, immersion trips, and global mission initiatives and served on the International Council of Young Lasallians. Currently, she supports the Lasallian educational mission as a practicum facilitator at The Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies and as a trustee for Christian Brothers Academy in Albany, NY. A seasoned leader in nonprofit management and educational leadership, Jolleen is also a trained facilitator in restorative practices and has partnered with numerous organizations for retreats and conferences. A native of Green Island, NY, she earned a B.A. in English from Siena College, receiving the Franciscan Spirit Award in 2014, a master's in character education from the University of Birmingham in 2022, and the Legacy Luminary Award from the WeINSPIRE Movement in 2024. In every endeavor, she seeks to expand the intersection of education, service, community, and justice.



KERRIE JACKSON

Gestalt Community Schools

Kerrie Jackson is the Managing Director of Gestalt's Network Inclusion Culture and Equity (N.I.C.E.) Team. As a native Memphian, she started her career in education in 2010. She taught 8th grade ELA in South Memphis for 5 years at Corry Middle School. Kerrie joined Gestalt Community Schools in 2015 as an 8th-grade ELA teacher. She completed her counseling internship at PCAHS and then became the 9th grade counselor. In her first year as the 9th-grade counselor, she was awarded Counselor of the Year. After one year at the school, she was transferred to the Southeast Campus where she served as the Counselor and later in the dual role of Dean of Scholars. During this time Kerrie received her EDS in Education Administration in 2021 from Freed Hardeman University. Since helping establish the NICE Team, she has been featured on the New Memphis Podcast and in the Daily Memphian. She continues her work supporting all Gestalt stakeholders in being physically, emotionally and mentally well through NICE Team programming.

Breakout Session Summaries: March 4th



BREAKOUT SESSION 1

10:00 - 10:45 a.m.

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Transforming School Leadership: Cultivating Equity and Wellbeing through Character Education

Dr. Melinda Bier, Dr. Fatima Salas-Rodriguez, and Anastasia Hercules, University of Missouri-St. Louis

As times have changed so have the things institutions need from their leaders. Perhaps nowhere is the need for new approaches to leadership stronger than in K-12 education. While the research demonstrating the critical importance of school leaders to the success of a school has been steadily growing, the attractiveness of these roles and the well-being of the people filling them has been decreasing. This session explores how training and mentoring in character education and servant leadership can address these challenges by supporting the growth and development of educators and their communities. The session will highlight findings from the Character Education Emerging Leaders Academy (CEEL), a 12-month professional development program designed to cultivate servant leadership virtues and equip school administrators with tools to lead equitable, whole-school character education reform. Participants engage in interactive workshops that foster virtues such as courage, forgiveness, gratitude, and equity while creating school-specific character education implementation plans. Ongoing mentoring and support further enhance participants' leadership practices, fostering sustainable change within their schools.

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Navigating challenging conversations: Can cultivating civic virtue advance (or undermine) equity?

Dr. Matthew Post, University of Tulsa

My session will present a case study, model, and practical strategies aligned with conference themes of character and equity, inclusive and compassionate communities, and holistic human development in K-12 education. I will share insights from six week-long seminars (2022-2023) with 20-25 high school civics teachers and school leaders from diverse Texas schools. Discussions centered on civic virtue in the context of American founding principles, oppression versus rights, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Initially marked by tension and conflict, the sessions ultimately fostered civil discourse, trust, and deeper engagement with civic virtue. I will highlight best practices in character education, the integration of DEI, and controversial decisions such as using texts that misrepresent virtue to justify oppression. The objective is to spark meaningful discussions on strategies for cultivating civic virtue and equity in K-12 education.

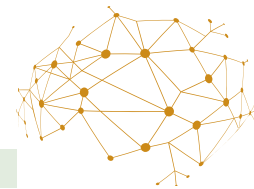
Presentation 2 - Embracing Voices: Cultivating Diversity and Inclusion Through Dialogue

Dr. Jane Cobia and Dr. Kara Chism, Samford University

Would you like to further embrace a place where diverse voices are heard and truly drive innovation and collaboration? Samford University has developed and sponsored an annual Diversity Forum for educators where different voices come together to learn from each other and to become aware of new opportunities for collaboration and inclusion. The Forum has focused on socioeconomics, racial diversity English Languages Learners, and special education. This roundtable session will share ideas used in the Diversity Forum to spark dialogue and to generate ideas for innovative ways for all voices to collaborate.

BREAKOUT SESSION 1 (Continued)

10:00 - 10:45 a.m.



International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop - Exploring Virtue Based Leadership in Ethical Decision Making

Dr. Lance Forman and Dr. Robin Cayce, Lipscomb University

School leaders makes countless decisions each day that impact every facet of the school community. Many, if not most, of these decisions are made in the gray area of the school day, moments for which there is no easy approach or “yes” or “no” answer. This gray area of our decisions is filled with the unique needs and lived experiences of the families we lead. How, then, are we to make decisions when the unique needs of the families we serve do not fit neatly into compartmentalized boxes of policy language. In this session, we will explore the importance of Practical Wisdom in Ethical Decision Making using cinematic quality dilemma films.

Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Focusing on Character Leads to Success for One Marginalized Community

Dr. Ben White, Dr. Brenda Mendiola, Dr. Darlene Atkins, Casey Dykes, University of Alabama

This case study highlights the significant impact a character-focused administrator had on a high-poverty, high-minority inner-city school in Central Alabama. We will walk session participants through the steps used by a transformational leader to turn around a low-performing middle school. The school suffered low standardized testing scores, high teacher turnover, high out-of-school suspensions, and chronic student absentee problems. Within three years of implementing character practices, the middle school received the highest state report card grade in its history. Teacher retention, test scores, suspensions, and attendance improved dramatically, leading the school to earn recognition as a National School of Character by Character.org. Attendees will take a 3-year journey through the eyes of the administrator. We will evaluate the principal’s thought process as she diagnoses the state of the school and determines the next steps along the way. We will reflect on and celebrate successful character practices and discuss unsuccessful ones. We will discuss strategies used to increase stakeholder buy-in from teachers, students, parents, and community members. The session will include a time for questions and interactive pieces that will allow attendees to discuss their next steps based on data and situations presented in the study. This session will benefit those in K-12 positions, teaching leadership courses, or providing professional development to aspiring and current leaders.

Presentation 2 - Toward a Character Education Approach to Teaching about Race in the U.S.

Barbara Whitlock, Montrose School

While teaching about race in the U.S. has been complicated by the effects of political polarization, the principles developed through character education research offer a fresh lens to illuminate old challenges. I will introduce research from a three-year intervention study to support greater engagement in dialogue about race, which expands upon the 2021 research published in *The Courageous Dialogue Toolkit* (Whitlock & Bohlin, 2021). This current research promises to inform teaching practice while offering insights into building school culture. Character education research on moral exemplars and moral dilemmas informs this approach that has antecedents in the work of W.E.B. Dubois and targets the roots of racism in “the danger of single stories,” as coined by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Roundtables: Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Assessing the Additive Value of Character Skills in Diverse Student Populations

Dr. Jake Plantz, Enrollment Management Association

In this roundtable discussion, we will lay out the state of the research on what non-cognitive assessments can add beyond cognitive tests in admissions. We will then briefly discuss the work we have done at the Enrollment Management Association to understand this relationship before turning to a broader discussion with the table. Participants will be asked to think about and discuss their ideas on how character can inform a holistic admissions process, what role it should play in admissions, and its value in fostering equitable admission strategies.

BREAKOUT SESSION I (Continued)

10:00 - 10:45 a.m. Roundtables: Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level



Combating Isolation through Continuous Learning and Coaching Opportunities for Rural Leaders

Dr. Mary Sult, Dr. Denise Schares and Amanda Schimdt, University of Northern Iowa

This session will provide an overview of the state-wide work the IEL is doing to provide educational leaders with a variety of opportunities to encourage connections, facilitate professional growth and development, and engage with tools to support the work within rural school districts and communities in Iowa through the intentional inclusion of linkages to ethics standards and aligned practices. Participants will walk away with an overview of workshop content, and strategies for engaging with rural leaders and school boards that can be replicated in their setting. Participants will also gain a deeper understanding of the need to engage in development opportunities rich in professional dialogue with colleagues at all levels of educational leadership focused on ethical decision-making that is aligned to district policy as well as embedded in district procedures. There will be time at the end of the session to answer questions and engage in dialogue with others about what was presented.

Doing “Good Work” Together: Insights and Puzzles from a Member-Driven Community of Practice Focused on Character

Daniel Mucinskis, Dr. Shelby Clark, and Lynn Barendsen, Harvard University

Since 2022, researchers from The Good Project at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education have led an online, international Community of Practice (COP) focused on helping educators promote excellence, ethics, engagement, and responsible decision-making. Prioritizing member voice while maintaining a core focus on character development, the COP fosters collective impact. In this interactive roundtable, we will share successes and challenges in creating equitable, character-focused communities that support educators and students. Discussion will explore effective COP design, collaboration across differences, and balancing guidance with empowerment. Participants will gain insights into fostering equitable, collaborative educational communities that advance both character and equity.

Observing Student Learning Protocols: Advancing Equiry and Character

Rochelle Van Dijk, Great MN Schools and Amy Nicholson, TNTP

At a time when educational spaces must prioritize equity and character formation, observation protocols offer a powerful tool for fostering inclusive learning environments. This workshop introduces the Observing Student Learning Protocol, a qualitative framework that helps educators analyze student engagement—cognitively, socially, and emotionally—in collaborative activities. Participants will explore how low-inference observation, student reflection, and action planning can advance equitable participation and character development. Through interactive exercises, attendees will draft key elements of their own observation protocols, aligning them with their school’s values and goals. By the session’s end, participants will have a foundational framework for implementing observation tools that enhance leadership development, teacher preparation, and K-12 classroom practices.

Equity in Action: Culturally-Responsive Character Education for Thriving Schools

Dr. Kate Allman and Dr. Christina Richardson, Wake Forest University

This session explores the interplay between character formation and equity as interwoven concerns essential for creating thriving K-12 school communities. Drawing on the work of the Winston-Salem TEACH program and the Program for Leadership and Character at Wake Forest University, the presentation will demonstrate how culturally-responsive character education can serve as a transformative framework for equity-focused teacher preparation and K-12 environments. Participants will gain insights from research findings, innovative curricula, and practical strategies designed to foster equitable and compassionate educational spaces. Highlighting the role of character formation in addressing systemic inequities, the session will examine data from mixed-methods research involving the virtues valued by educators in a mid-sized urban school district in the southern United States. These findings informed the development of culturally responsive lesson plans and professional development modules that align with North Carolina’s character education standards.

BREAKOUT SESSION II

11:00 - 11:45 a.m.



Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Appreciative Tuning Protocol: Bridging Higher Ed and K-12 to Improve Character Integration

Dr. Teresa Foulger, Arizona State University

This 45-minute workshop will introduce the Appreciative Tuning Protocol (ATP) as a professional development model for integrating Principled Innovation (PI) into educator preparation. Participants will explore how ATP fosters collaborative refinement of character development practices across higher education and K-12. The session will include a demonstration of the ATP process, engaging a university instructor, an instructional designer, and a K-12 educator in real-time reflection. Attendees will discuss how ATP supports cross-institutional collaboration and consider its application in their own contexts. Key takeaways include practical tools, such as the PI card deck, and insights from case studies showcasing ATP's impact on course design.

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - The Equity and Justice Academy in Character Education (EJACE): An immersive experience helping school communities create an equitable and just culture for ALL to flourish

Michael Barolak and Dr. Grace Lee

The Equity and Justice Academy in Character Education's (EJACE) mission is to ensure a just, equitable, and inclusive school culture by supporting school communities as they identify and develop mission and vision, values, people, practices, place and space, and narrative that will eliminate the negative impact of inherent bias, social insensitivity, prejudices, and systematic intolerance. The focus of EJACE is intentionally including and engaging ALL stakeholders to ensure their voices are part of helping shift the culture and climate of each school. This presentation will engage participants in what the yearlong EJACE cohort is about by: immersing them in the history and rationale of the academy, exploring EJACE sessions for the scope and sequence of the work, and learning about how the themes of the work are supported through engaging activities.

Presentation 2 - Exemplars of Justice: Supporting College Students' Critical Consciousness Development through Cross-Institutional Engagement

Dr. Sara Etz Mendonça and Dr. Michael Lamb, Wake Forest University

This session presents a cross-institutional college program inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, designed to foster character development and intercultural understanding among students from two distinct universities. Grounded in a critical consciousness framework, the program integrates multiple pedagogical approaches—compassionate listening, collaboration, and engagement with moral exemplars—to cultivate justice as a virtue. Presenters will share key program events, preliminary impact evidence, and insights on designing community-based initiatives that promote equity and character growth. This session is valuable for educators, researchers, administrators, and community leaders seeking to implement similar transformative experiences in diverse educational settings.

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop - Generous Listening and Dialogue for Character and Community Development

Dr. Jonathan Tirrell, Naomi Boase, and James Fisher, Tufts University

In an era of increasing polarization, listening and dialogue are essential for fostering understanding, reducing bias, and promoting human flourishing. This interactive workshop will introduce participants to dialogic practices—specifically generous listening and meaningful dialogue—as tools for bridging divides and strengthening character and community development. Grounded in contemporary approaches to human flourishing, the session will explore how exposure to diverse perspectives enhances civic identity, collaboration, and individuation, particularly in higher education settings. Participants will engage in practical exercises that cultivate the skills needed to navigate differences, build trust, and contribute to a more inclusive and thriving society.

BREAK OUT SESSION II (continued)

11:00 - 11:45 a.m.



Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1: Building a Just Community Through Virtue Storytelling

Bob Nardo, Dawn Bradley, and Emilie Rogers, Libertas School of Memphis

How can culturally responsive literature and classroom circles foster character development and a more equitable community? This session explores a case study from Libertas, a high-poverty public school in North Memphis that transformed into Tennessee's first Montessori charter, achieving significant academic gains and community engagement. Central to this success is Acorns to Oaks, a unique character and community curriculum that integrates African American literature with neo-Aristotelian and Montessori principles. Participants will engage in interactive discussions and explore practical tools for implementing literature-based character education, fostering inclusive classroom cultures, and developing both student and teacher competencies for meaningful community building.

Presentation 2 - Forming a Flourishing Adult Culture to Sustain a Character-Driven K-12 Environment

Yetta Lewis and Bobbie Turner, Gestalt Community Schools

How can schools cultivate a thriving, character-driven culture that is deeply rooted in community identity, values, and needs? This session explores the case study of Gestalt Community Schools, a Memphis-based charter network serving over 2,700 minority students and families. In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Gestalt prioritized adult formation and professional development as the foundation for sustaining student character development. Presenters will share best practices for securing community voices, developing a shared language, and codifying core values to create a lasting culture of human flourishing. The session includes a 20-minute case study presentation followed by an interactive Q&A.

Roundtables - Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Empowering School Communities to Make Ethical & Equitable Decisions

Dr. Maureen Spelman, North Central College

This proposed project is unique and comprehensive in that it aims to build the capacity for ethical and equitable decision-making first in school leaders and teachers. Then as these educators develop ethical and equitable decision-making habits, they will model and teach those skills to their K-12 students. Participating K-12 educators will engage in monthly professional development sessions focused on collaborative problem-solving/decision-making. Using an ethical dilemma reflection framework designed to cultivate the capacity for critical analysis and decision-making, participants will build their capacity to make ethical and equitable decisions. The next phase will be to build on the adult learning experiences and apply these new skills in participants' K-12 classrooms. To build decision-making competence in K-12 students, a team of higher education and K-12 educators will collaborate to design developmentally appropriate character-based decision-making frameworks for use with K-12 students. In addition, they will create developmentally appropriate sets of curricular experiences where students can practice and build muscle memory in applying the framework to authentic decision-making scenarios.

Character and Equity in Islamic Higher Education: The Case of Muhammadiyah University, Indonesia

Erpin Said, University of Rochester

This session explores character education and equity integration at Muhammadiyah University in Indonesia, focusing on how these elements contribute to a holistic educational environment. As conceptualized by Muhammadiyah, character education is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, aiming to foster students with strong moral values, integrity, and a commitment to social responsibility. The AIKA curriculum (Al-Islam, Kemuhammadiyahan, and Arabic) serves as the core of character education, reflecting the university's mission to balance academic development with the cultivation of ethical and spiritual values. Despite challenges in implementation, the AIKA curriculum demonstrates potential as a model for integrating character education with equitable practices in higher education. This study also addresses the role of inclusive educational policies in bridging gaps between students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds while maintaining a solid foundation in religious values. By examining the intersection of character and equity, this session aims to contribute to the discourse on how faith-based educational institutions can create environments where all students, regardless of background, can thrive.



BREAKOUT SESSION II (continued)

11:00 - 11:45 a.m.

Roundtables - Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Rooted in Dignity: Cultivating Character and Equity for Flourishing School Communities

Yeime Valle, Michael Carbone, and Jolleen Wagner, Brilla Schools/Seton Education Partners

This roundtable delves into dignity—the foundational understanding of the special value of every human person—as the essential root from which character formation and equity grow. Drawing inspiration from Brilla Schools' model, which integrates explicit instruction on dignity & virtues with families, students, and staff, the session highlights how a shared commitment to dignity & virtues fosters equitable and thriving school communities. The session explores how centering dignity transforms school communities by weaving together Brilla's practices of explicit virtue instruction, family engagement, and staff formation. By learning about how Brilla systematized and integrated this work so it takes root (i.e. attending to cross-functionality) participants will discover how cultivating dignity within all community members lays the groundwork for equity and character education, ensuring every individual is recognized, valued, and equipped to flourish.

Character at the Core: Integrating Character Formation and Equity into Institutional Culture

Emily Farkas and Sean Sullivan, Grand Canyon University

This roundtable session provides educational leaders with a comprehensive guide to embedding character formation into institutional policies and practices through a top-down approach that promotes equity. Participants will learn how aligning mission statements, competencies, curricula, and professional development fosters a culture where character and equity thrive together. The session highlights the role of the Canyon Center for Character Education as a hub for cultural transformation, showcasing collaborative initiatives like trainings and events that support diverse students and faculty. Attendees will explore actionable strategies and insights on integrating character education language into institutional frameworks to create inclusive and thriving learning environments.

Engaging Minds: Leveraging Neurotechnology and AI Integration for Equitable and Character-Driven Education

Adma Gama-Krummel and Caitlin Sharp, University of Rochester

The integration of neurotechnology and AI in education is reshaping teaching and learning, offering new possibilities for personalized instruction and student engagement. Wearable EEG devices, neurofeedback systems, and AI-driven analytics provide real-time insights into cognitive and emotional states, enhancing adaptive teaching methods. While these innovations promise significant benefits, they also raise ethical concerns around mental privacy, data security, and equitable access. This workshop critically examines both the potential and challenges of these technologies, using case studies and interactive discussions to explore responsible and inclusive implementation strategies. Participants will engage with real-world applications and develop actionable approaches for ethical integration in educational settings.



BREAKOUT SESSION III

1:15 - 2:00 p.m.

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Human Canopy: Exploring Identity and Equity Amongst Students

Dr. Ashley Brandon and Emily Farkas, Grand Canyon University

The workshop session, "The Humanity Canopy," models how to build strong, respectful relationships within a team by fostering equity, empathy, perspective-taking, and connection. Participants engage in a meaningful activity that highlights shared human experiences and individual differences. Using a circle of poles with hooks, participants map their personal life experiences or virtues with yarn, creating a visual canopy that represents the collective identity of the group. Afterward, facilitators reveal the purpose and details of the experience, encouraging participants to reflect on shared experiences and foster understanding. The session concludes with a reflective and open discussion on adapting the exercise for diverse audiences, promoting trust, empowerment, and equity within teams.

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Self-Determination Theory Perspectives on Equity and Character Education

Dr. Randall Curren and Sieun Park, University of Rochester

The session will offer Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspectives on the interface of equity and character education. According to SDT, virtue and well-being are closely interconnected and the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (3BPNs)—to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is essential for developing virtue and experiencing well-being. Psychologically need-supportive teaching and learning environments that facilitate the satisfaction of the 3BPNs for all students is thus crucial to the success of character education, equity, and student well-being. The session will focus on two key aspects of the interface between equity and character education: the role of punishment in schools and the promotion of empathetic understanding. Regarding punishment, SDT suggests ways in which Lawrence Kohlberg's just school community approach can be strengthened and reliance on excessive and inequitable punishment in schools can be reduced in favor of a more consistently need-supportive character development orientation. Regarding empathy, SDT highlights the importance of integrative emotion regulation (IER), which refers to attending to, accepting, and integrating emotions rather than controlling or suppressing them. IER can be helpful to fostering empathetic spaces in which students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives can understand each other.

Presentation 2: Choosing Connection over Conflict: A Case Study of Bridging Differences in order to Build Community

Dr. Stacy Schmauss and Dr. Cheraton Love, Wake Forest University

Many institutions face difficult choices when determining how to integrate new content into their curricula. This is especially true for professional schools--and the health professions in particular. That challenge is additionally confounded when then intended content integration is rooted in character education. However, the need to support an increasingly diverse student base while simultaneously encouraging constructive dialogic strategies to improve peer-to-peer relationships and interdisciplinary team functionality is critical. To achieve this, a novel pilot project was created by the Kern National Network. Involving 9 different institutions and engaging the educational teachings of the Constructive Dialogue Institute, this pilot is encouraging--and providing extensive support--for novel character-based, curricular interventions. Our presentation will provide the contextual basis for the project while also highlighting a case study of one institution's rationale for participation, development and the implementation process. We will provide preliminary data from early experiences engaging with the content from staff, faculty, and students.



BREAKOUT SESSION III (continued)

1:15 - 2:00 p.m.

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop: Character and Equity Through a Sociocultural Approach in Education

Dr. Elena Sada, Boston College

Sociocultural competence is the ability to understand and interact effectively with people from different cultures. Essential in this global world, sociocultural competence (SCC) is often overlooked or not fully understood in educational environments. The proposed interactive workshop will present to educational leaders a conceptual framework for character development and equity that centers SCC. After defining key concepts based on the aforementioned synthesis and framework, presenters will propose the framework as an innovative model for schools that seek to foster SCC and equity in K-12 school communities, and school leaders will have the opportunity to review samples of lesson activities where character formation, SCC concepts and instructional performance indicators are weaved together to foster equity in the classroom and across school activities.

Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Leading Flourishing Schools: A Curriculum Case Study

Dr. Michael Hahn, Diane Moeller, and Sasha Kuznetsov. Saint Mary's University of Minnesota

Minnesota law requires educational administrators to demonstrate competence in equity and culturally responsive leadership but does not explicitly mandate character education. While some view character education as separate from or even opposed to equity efforts, growing research suggests they are mutually supportive. This presentation will explore how advancing equity requires moral virtue formation and is most effective when aimed at the flourishing of the whole school community. Presenters will share the design process of a curriculum for future educational leaders, offering practical strategies for integrating character education with equity and culturally responsive leadership. The session is valuable for higher education faculty, curriculum designers, and K-12 leaders invested in this intersection.

Presentation 2 - Character in Context: Reflections on How to Fit Character to Institution from ECI Grantees

Cristy Guleserian, Arizona State University; Dr. Heather Keith, Radford University; Dr. Juliette Ratchford, Wake Forest University; Glenn McMillan, Medgar Evers College - CUNY; and moderated by Dr. Michael Lamb, Wake Forest University

In a world of ever-increasing polarization, character may serve as a bridge across divides, but character education that is not attuned to its particular context may instead further isolate and polarize people across differences. Scholars agree that enacting character requires consideration of context: good character requires doing the right thing at the right place and right time. Yet research on character in context is also both narrowly tailored and incomplete. The Educating Character Initiative (ECI) at Wake Forest University was founded to support U.S. colleges and universities in developing programs of character formation according to the distinctive mission, vision, and populations of their undergraduate institutions. In its first grant cycle, the ECI awarded grants to 71 institutions seeking to integrate character in their communities. Reflecting the ECI's commitment to educating character in context, the presenters in this session—all grantees from ECI—will speak to the challenges and successes of their character education work. Each panelist will share more about how they are educating character creatively in response to their distinct context.

BREAKOUT SESSION III (continued)

1:00 - 2:15 p.m.



Roundtables - Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Integrating Character Assessment in the Redesign of a More Equitable College Admission System

David Hawkins, National Association for College Admission Counseling

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is launching a center to redesign college admissions with a focus on equity. Many existing admission policies were originally designed to exclude, and NACAC's Character Focus Initiative, started in 2023, aims to develop fair and meaningful methods for assessing character in the admission process. While research shows that admission offices highly value character traits, there is little clarity on how these traits are defined, assessed, and communicated. This session brings together admission practitioners, researchers, and nonprofit leaders to discuss current practices, share sample models, and gather feedback on building a more inclusive and equitable approach to character assessment in college admissions.

Student Flourishing in the Age of AI

Dr. Susan Morrissey, Boston College and Dr. Christina Richardson, Wake Forest University

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, a pressing question emerges for educators and parents: Are students gravitating towards traditional human-to-human relationships, or are they increasingly drawn to the allure of AI-mediated connections? This shift presents a complex tapestry of rewards and risks. On one hand, AI tools offer unprecedented convenience, privacy, and accessibility in forming and maintaining relationships. They can provide a safe space for self-expression and exploration, particularly for introverted or socially anxious individuals. However, the potential drawbacks are significant: the risk of emotional stunting, decreased empathy, and a possible inability to navigate real-world social complexities. As researchers and educators consider the impact on human flourishing, they must grapple with the long-term consequences of these technological choices. Current trends suggest a growing reliance on digital interactions, but the full implications remain unclear. The emerging landscape demands careful examination of how artificial intelligence might reshape social development, communication patterns, and interpersonal skills among younger generations. This dilemma forms the crux of the upcoming roundtable discussion, "Student Flourishing in the Age of AI," where nuanced issues and potential impacts on social and emotional development will be discussed.

Character and Equity Through Entrepreneurship Embodiment and Entrepreneurship

Dr. Kerri Cissna, Miami University and Dr. Anna-Katharina Lenz, Miami University

How can we embody equity and character in entrepreneurship education? This roundtable discussion begins with an exploration of how embodied practices—such as Gendlin's Focusing approach—connect to key virtues like empathy, curiosity, resilience, and courage. These virtues are foundational to entrepreneurial leadership and can be developed by teaching students to attune to their felt sense—a bodily awareness that carries implicit meaning and deeper insights. Participants will collaboratively explore: 1) Ways to link embodied awareness with cultivating virtues that drive equity and character in entrepreneurship; 2) Practical strategies for integrating embodied practices into entrepreneurship education to help students overcome internal roadblocks, access intuitive solutions, and lead with confidence.

Character and Equity Through Entrepreneurship - Social Entrepreneurship: You're Doing It Without Even Realizing

Megan Smith, John W. Altman Institute for Entrepreneurship, and Amber Peskin, Butler Behavioral Health

This roundtable explores how the Golden Thread—a concept from social work ensuring continuity and alignment of care—applies to social entrepreneurship. Many school based professionals already use entrepreneurial principles without realizing it. Through a guided discussion, participants will map their own "Golden Thread," connecting their daily work to broader social impact. By recognizing these existing skills, we can reframe social entrepreneurship as a mindset rather than a title. This session will offer a space to share experiences, explore character-driven decision-making, and discuss strategies for sustaining purpose-driven work while fostering character, equity and innovation.

Breakout Session Summaries: March 5th



BREAKOUT SESSION IV

9:15 - 10:00 a.m.

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Empowering Educators for Equity and Flourishing through Wellbeing

Anastasia Hercules, University of Missouri-St. Louis

Teacher wellbeing is essential for creating equitable, character-driven school environments, yet overwhelming stress and burnout continue to challenge the profession. This session introduces a four-part professional development program designed to help educators prioritize their own wellbeing through self-reflection, boundary-setting, and sustainable support systems. Grounded in virtues such as courage, humility, stewardship, and gratitude, the program moves from self-reflection to habit formation and long-term resilience. Through interactive activities and peer support, participants will gain practical tools to foster a thriving educator community—recognizing that the wellbeing of teachers directly impacts the success and inclusivity of their schools.

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Advancing Equity, Developing Character Through Innovation

Carolyn Chandler, Strategic School Leadership and Josh Densen, Next Chapter Coaching

This presentation will highlight the work of three contemporary researchers and writers who advocate for humanizing American education and advancing equity and character development in our schools. Presenters Josh Densen and Carolyn Chandler will then present specific examples from their own work as well as from both independent and public schools around the country. Carolyn's leadership at Metairie Park Country Day School during the school's post-Katrina recovery exemplifies how empathy and intentional character-building can unify communities. Josh's pioneering work at Bricolage Academy demonstrates how equity-focused design thinking, policy innovation, and community engagement can bridge divides and foster success.

Presentation 2 - All In: Novel Strategies for Adult Character Formation

Kelsey LaVigne, Figment Solutions

Teachers cannot model for students externally what they are not devoted to internally. By creating the conditions for adults to experience or reflect on their personal journey with character development, we can ignite their commitment to character education. This session will explore examples of programming designed to achieve this goal and provide opportunities for collaborative development of additional strategies or ideas.

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop: Building Thriving Educational Communities: Integrating Character, Equity, and Leadership Through Principled Innovation

Megan Hennessy, Arizona State University; Dr. Jennifer Brown Urban and Dr. Elyse Postlewaite, Montclair State University

This workshop explores Principled Innovation (PI), a transformative framework from Arizona State University that integrates moral, civic, performance, and intellectual virtues into decision-making to create inclusive and thriving educational communities. Through Communities of Practice (CoPs)—collaborative learning spaces—educators and leaders build meaningful connections, share knowledge, and implement strategies that advance equity and character formation. Drawing on a multi-year study with Montclair State University, the session highlights how CoPs enhance reflective practice, ethical decision-making, and systemic change across K-12 and higher education. Participants will engage in dynamic discussions and activities, leaving with actionable strategies to cultivate compassionate and values-driven learning environments.

BREAKOUT SESSION IV (continued)

9:15 - 10:00 a.m.



Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - A Culture of Character for All Schools

Elizabeth Huntley, Hope Institute; Latoya Seals, Cornerstone Schools of Alabama; Dr. Gregory Moore, Springville High School; and Dr. Darlene Atkins, Tuscaloosa City Schools

The Hope Institute will explore strategies for ensuring equitable access to character-building opportunities through the Hope Leadership Academy. This session features a diverse panel of school leaders who have successfully embedded character formation in their educational programs after participating in the Academy. Panelists will represent a range of school contexts, including high-poverty schools, faith-based institutions, and schools serving students with special needs. Through engaging discussions, attendees will gain practical insights and actionable strategies for fostering a culture of character in any school setting, reinforcing the belief that character education is accessible and beneficial for all communities.

Presentation 2 - Designing Schools that Center Character and Equity

Rebecca Feiden, BES; Nolan McDaniel, Chattacademy Community School; and Dr. Brenda Jones, Invictus Nashville Charter School

BES staff and alumni of the BES Fellowship will share learnings about designing and founding locally-responsive public charter schools that center character and equity. BES staff will share key learnings about principles and strategies for integrating both character and equity into school models. In addition, school founders will share their school founding stories, including details of how their school model centers character development and equity, challenges they encountered, and lessons learned. Participants, including K-12 educators and administrators, will be able to draw connections between the principles and strategies discussed and their own work to integrate character development and equity into their own schools.

Roundtables- Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Using Emoji to Strengthen Character Development and Joyful Learning in Early Childhood Education

Waode Eti Hardiyanti, University of Rochester

This roundtable discussion will explore an innovative approach to embedding character formation in educational contexts by utilizing emoji media as a tool for improving children's well-being and language abilities. Children aged 5-6 years in a Kindergarten in Konawe Selatan, Indonesia, were encouraged to share their experiences, ideas, and opinions through the use of emojis. This process not only improved their confidence and motivation but also promoted a sense of belonging and self-worth, which are fundamental to character development. The use of emoji media provides a practical framework for improving children's well-being and language skills while respecting their individuality. Such partnerships underscore the transformative potential of combining theoretical understanding with real-world applications to address equity and character formation in educational settings.

Fostering Ethical Citizens: A Professional Development on Cultures of Character for School Leaders

Dr. Rob Williams, Arkansas State University

This roundtable highlights Arkansas State University's Character-Centered Leadership summer institute, designed to equip P-12 school leaders with the tools to foster character education in their schools. The session will share insights from the institute's development, implementation, and evaluation, showcasing its impact on participants and emerging trends in character education. Evaluation results and school leader feedback will inform future program improvements, foster a collaborative network of schools, and contribute to best-practice resources. By strengthening leadership capacity, this initiative aims to cultivate ethical, responsible citizens and embed character education as a core pillar of school communities.



BREAKOUT SESSION IV (continued)

9:15 - 10:00 a.m.

Roundtables - Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

NGOs As Moral Models of Ethical Leadership

Robert Bandoni, Students Shoulder to Shoulder and Dr. Karambu Ringera, International Peace Initiatives

Dr. Karambu Ringera (International Peace Initiatives) and Robert Bandoni (Students Shoulder-to-Shoulder), both nonprofit directors, will lead a discussion on an innovative educational model they describe as field studies in ethical leadership. Drawing from their decade of work together, Karambu and Bob will discuss the principles of a collaborative partnership between schools and NGOs/nonprofits that create transformative, character-building experiences for high school students, faculty, and entire communities. Differentiating “learning service” from “service learning,” this roundtable discussion will explore the details of such a partnership and the processing curriculum that inspires and empowers students and faculty to practice ethical leadership in their own communities and beyond.

Cultivating Communities of Character: Building Flourishing Faculty in K-12 Schools

Natalie Demers, Jabulani

Faculty play a central role in shaping inclusive, equitable, and thriving school communities, yet their own well-being and character formation are often overlooked. This roundtable discussion invites educators, administrators, and thought leaders to explore how cultivating communities of character among faculty can drive both equity and flourishing in K-12 schools. Participants will engage in dialogue on integrating character and equity in faculty culture, practical strategies for leadership teams, and the intersection of faculty recruitment and retention with school values. Through facilitated discussions, attendees will share challenges, successes, and innovative approaches, leaving with actionable insights to foster faculty well-being and strengthen school culture.

BREAKOUT SESSION V

10:15 - 11:00 a.m.

Louis XVI, Mezzanine Level

Workshop - Fostering High Regard through Head, Heart, and Hands for Inclusive and Compassionate Education

Dr. Lori Doyle, Concordia University Irvine; Jolleen Wagner, Brilla Schools/Seton Education Partners; and Dr. Nancy Winfrey, Wake Forest University

This interactive workshop invites educators to explore the Head, Heart, and Hands model as a pathway to fostering high regard and inclusivity in educational settings. Participants will examine the interconnected roles of the Head (high-regard mindset), Heart (empathetic emotional response), and Hands (compassionate action) in cultivating a culture of respect and belonging. Emphasizing that high regard is built through trust, empathy, and compassionate engagement rather than authority, the workshop will challenge assumptions about inclusivity and equity, encouraging participants to view equity as an intentional component of character formation. Through case studies and discussions, educators will identify actionable strategies to integrate this model into their practice, promoting a culture of high regard and belonging for all.

BREAKOUT SESSION V (continued)

10:15 - 11:00 a.m.

Galaxie Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Delivering a Personal Formation Experience with High School Students

Kerrie Jackson, Gestalt Community Schools and Dr. Tony Klemmer, Wisdom for Good

There is universal agreement that K-12 schools play a vital role in the formation of students regardless of school design or intended student populations. Whether schools explicitly tackle “whole child” development or not, education remains an intrinsically moral endeavor. Efforts to strike a balance between the need for student moral formation and the resistance borne of our increasingly secular culture and historic separation of church and state present challenges. These challenges are exacerbated when leading schools in resilient communities with their own unique histories and diverse populations. This case study will present pilot efforts to explicitly incorporate personal formation into the educational experience of high school students in a predominantly Black and Hispanic urban community. The planning, development and delivery of the program will be detailed as well as the work with adult staff leading the effort. Specific case study content will include the ways in which the dignity of every human person is addressed and the pedagogical choices made to authentically shift the way these high school students view the world through a moral lens. Early efforts at assessment of impact will also be shared in this session.

Presentation 2 - Practical Wisdom from a Research Practice Partnership: Promoting Equity, Character & Flourishing through School Leadership

Dr. Karen Bohlin, Harvard University; Dr. Andrea Mayfield, University of West Alabama; Tonya Starks, George P. Austin Middle School; Dr. Luther Riley, Greensboro High School

School leaders face daily challenges that demand nuanced thinking and judgment, not one-size-fits-all answers. Under-resourced rural schools face additional challenges that poverty brings to their daily work. Given the growing complexity of demands on schools, it is not uncommon for educational leaders of good will to find themselves putting out fires and living on the edge of burnout. This presentation explores what practically wise and formative leadership can look like amidst daily stresses, and how it can be achieved by school leadership teams. We bring together practitioners, rural school principals from the Black Belt Region of Alabama and Mississippi, alongside researchers from the University of West Alabama, Harvard, and the University of Florida to share findings and professional insights from their participation in Practical Wisdom for Agile Leadership (PWAL) 2023-2024 Executive Education Program and stories highlighting the wise practices they employ from that experience to build community, character and flourishing in their school communities.

International Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Workshop - Flourishing Begins with the Educators: Developing Faculty to Cultivate Student Success

Peter Anderson, Washington Latin Public Charter School

This workshop explores the integral role of “educator flourishing” in creating environments where students thrive, emphasizing the essential connection between character development for faculty and student success. At Washington Latin, we believe that to foster human flourishing in students, we must first nurture it in the adults within our community. This session will showcase strategies we’ve implemented to create a supportive, character-focused professional development culture for our educators, rooted in “The Latin Way” – a set of guiding principles designed to cultivate integrity, compassion, and leadership. By aligning faculty growth with student success, we can establish a thriving, inclusive school culture where all members are empowered to reach their fullest potential. The workshop will introduce actionable approaches to embedding character education into faculty development. Participants will learn how to create ongoing opportunities for faculty self-reflection, wellness support, and equity-focused professional growth. We will also discuss how Washington Latin uses the Socratic seminar as a tool to foster open dialogue and build a culture of respect and inclusivity, ensuring that diverse perspectives are valued and integrated into teaching practices. These discussions have proven vital in addressing equity, building empathy, and cultivating the mindsets necessary for school communities to flourish.



BREAKOUT SESSION V

10:15 - 11:00 a.m.



Jackson Room, 3rd Floor, PECC

Presentation 1 - Rise by Rooting Down: Transformation Technology with ethics and professional dispositions

Aleta Forkum, Western Governors University

This presentation explores an innovative character education intervention implemented at Western Governors University (WGU) from 2022-2024, designed to integrate character formation and equity into teacher preparation programs at both undergraduate and master's levels. Using the Personal Learning Guide (PLG) as a transformative framework, the session will demonstrate how this tool fosters belonging, growth mindset, and professional readiness for aspiring educators. Attendees will learn how the PLG—modeled as a tree representing nurture, growth, and sustainability—connects students to their environment, supports SEL power skills, and builds a portfolio of evidence showcasing professionalism and ethical dispositions. The session will provide actionable strategies for using the PLG to cultivate community, enhance equity, and create transformative learning experiences in higher education.

Presentation 2: Whose Virtues? Exploring Character Through Culturally Diverse Student Voices

Dr. Elyse Postlewaite, Elaine Les, Anglin Thevaraja, Yasmine Perry, and Jaclyn Novak, Montclair State University

What does it mean to be a "good person" across different cultural contexts? This interactive presentation explores character strengths among students at a Hispanic-serving and minority-serving institution, challenging traditional Western models of character education. Using an inductive approach combining interviews, focus groups, and surveys, we examined how students from diverse backgrounds understand and express character strengths. We will share our methodological approach, preliminary findings, and strategies for eliciting authentic student perspectives on virtue and character. This session highlights the importance of culturally informed approaches in advancing equitable character education for diverse communities.

Roundtables - Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Embedding Values and Equity in Grammar Instruction: Saadi's Gulistan in Practice

Somayyeh Ariyanfar, University of Rochester

This roundtable explores how integrating English grammar instruction with moral and ethical narratives—such as Saadi's Gulistan—can foster character education and equity in the classroom. Participants will engage in interactive activities that demonstrate how literary texts can simultaneously teach language skills while nurturing virtues like empathy and kindness. Through text analysis, discussion, and collaborative storytelling, educators will explore ways to connect linguistic instruction with ethical decision-making, cultural appreciation, and social responsibility. The session will highlight how this approach promotes inclusive and equitable learning environments, inspiring educators to rethink traditional grammar instruction by embedding character development and cross-cultural understanding.

Strategizing and Costing Household-Inclusive Restorative Programs for Character Formation in School Districts

Arinze Amanekwe, University of Rochester

This session explores the intersection of character formation, equity, education policy, and restorative practices within K-12 education, emphasizing the critical connection between schools and households. Presenters will introduce a policy-informed framework for designing and financing household-inclusive restorative programs that promote student accountability, emotional intelligence, and resilience. Participants will examine theoretical foundations, policy considerations, and sustainable resource allocation strategies to ensure effective implementation. Using case studies and cost-benefit analyses, the session highlights collaborative policymaking, culturally responsive frameworks, and equitable funding models to address systemic inequities. Through interactive activities, attendees will design prototype restorative programs and explore advocacy strategies to build partnerships with families, ensuring long-term impact in underserved communities.



BREAKOUT SESSION V (continued)

10:15 - 11:00 a.m.

Roundtables - Continental Ballroom, Mezzanine Level

Use Polarity Mapping to Explore the Character and Equity Interaction

Mary Menacho, Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS)

The intersection of character and equity is not a problem to be solved, but an ongoing interplay. By identifying the upsides as well as the downsides of both character education per se as well as a singular focus on equity (DEI), participants will be able to leverage positive actions to take to promote each value, while also identifying early warning signs that one value is beginning to impinge the other. The session will include an overview of what polarity mapping is, suggested ways to begin mapping, time for individual mapping, partner conversation, modeling a conversation that could be an outcome of the mapping process, and general conversation about the relationship between character and equity, as well as general questions.

Student Voice as the Engine: Building Character and Equity Through Shared Power at DREAM Charter Schools

Kalila Hoggard and Sabrina Stavonor, DREAM Charter Schools

At DREAM Charter Schools, student voice is at the heart of character development and equity, shaping school culture through shared power and leadership. This discussion explores how DREAM systematically embeds student agency in daily school life—whether through co-creating cafeteria menus, leading advisory discussions, or making key decisions about school operations. Guided by a Dean of SEL and Community and supported by real-time data from the Hello Insight assessment tool, DREAM's framework rests on strong institutional support, authentic student leadership, and a long-term vision for student success. Participants will gain practical insights on embedding student-led initiatives, leadership structures, and assessment tools into their own schools, ensuring character formation and equity are driven by the students themselves.

We value your feedback!

Your feedback matters and helps to shape future KPCEL events and projects.



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Introducing the KPCEL Steering Committee



From Left to Right: Cristy Guleserian, Arizona State University; Dr. Ashley Brandon, Grand Canyon University; Dr. Kiana Smith, Charter School Growth Fund; Dr. Kara Chism, Samford University; Dr. Melodie Wytenbach, Boston College; and Dr. Amany Saleh, Arkansas State University

The Steering Committee is composed of leaders representing the diverse institutions and individuals that shape the KPCEL network, including research, teacher and leadership preparation, public and private institutions—all united in their commitment to character formation. Their role is to actively seek ongoing feedback from network members like you to inform the strategies, initiatives, and resources that will best support the KPCEL mission and community.

With your input, KPCEL will continue to create space for the community to connect with, learn from, and inspire one another. Together, we can build partnerships across research, theory, and practice to advance character development, practical wisdom, and human flourishing in all learning environments.

Cristy Guleserian is the Executive Director of Principled Innovation at Arizona State University, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, where she works collaboratively with faculty, staff, students, and community partners to integrate ASU's 9th design aspiration, Practice Principled Innovation, into culture, curriculum, and practice. Cristy strives to engage harmony through creativity, care and compassion. She is passionate about designing inclusive environments and systems where humans feel seen, heard, and valued. In prior roles, Cristy was Director of Social Emotional Learning and Character Development Programs at Casa Center for Positive Social Change and has served as an Interpersonal Communications Consultant in education, business, nonprofits, and healthcare.

Dr. Ashley Brandon is the Assistant Director for the Canyon Center for Character Education at Grand Canyon University, where she supports leaders, educators, and students in fostering a flourishing society through virtue formation and practical wisdom. She earned her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction and holds multiple degrees, including a Master's in Leadership and Teaching English as a Second Language, and a second Master's in Character Education from the University of Birmingham. With years of experience teaching K-6 and higher education, Ashley is deeply passionate about transforming lives through education.

Introducing the KPCEL Steering Committee

Dr. Kiana Smith is a dedicated educator and leader with over 20 years of experience supporting economically and racially marginalized youth, including justice-involved students. As the Director of Character and Culture at the Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF), she partners with schools and K-12 organizations to develop systems that promote human flourishing and organizational vitality. Leading the character practice at CSGF, she identifies, invests in, and scales promising character development practices across the education sector. Previously, Kiana served as the executive director of a PK-8 charter school, a middle school principal for six years, and began her career as a Teach For America teacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She has participated in prestigious fellowships, including Cambiar Catalyst, Fuerza, Mine, Restorative Justice Institute of Oklahoma, and the Confucius Institute. Kiana holds a B.A. from Savannah State University and both an M.Ed. and Ed.D. from the University of Oklahoma. Her commitment to equity and justice drives her efforts to build sustainable systems that empower marginalized communities and foster individual and organizational growth.

Dr. Kara Chism is assistant professor, Director of the Master of Science in Instructional Leadership program for Samford University's Orlean Beeson School of Education, and a consultant for the character education non-profit, The Hope Institute. She spent 21 years in public education as a teacher and administrator at the elementary, middle school, high school, and district office levels prior to her current position. Her professional interests include character development in schools, preparing future administrators and supporting schools in their character education work.

Dr. Melodie Wyttenbach is a faculty member for the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College. Prior to coming to Boston College and the Executive Director of the Roche Center for Catholic Education, Melodie served as an assistant professor and academic director of the Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program for the Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Notre Dame. She has served as president of Nativity Jesuit Academy in Milwaukee, WI and director of mission effectiveness for the NativityMiguel Network of Schools in Washington, DC. Melodie's current research and scholarship focuses on urban Catholic education, system-level leadership, effective governance practices, character formation across networks of schools, and the intersection of immigration and education. Her published work includes *Cultivating Talent: Examining Pathways to Increase the Presence of Hispanic Teachers and Leaders in Catholic Schools* (2022), *Seven Steps to Strategic Planning for Catholic School Leaders* (2020), and *Responding to the Call for Educational Justice: Transformative Catholic-Led Initiatives in Urban Education* (2018). Melodie has a doctorate in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and master's degrees in educational administration from Marquette University and education from Mount Mary College.

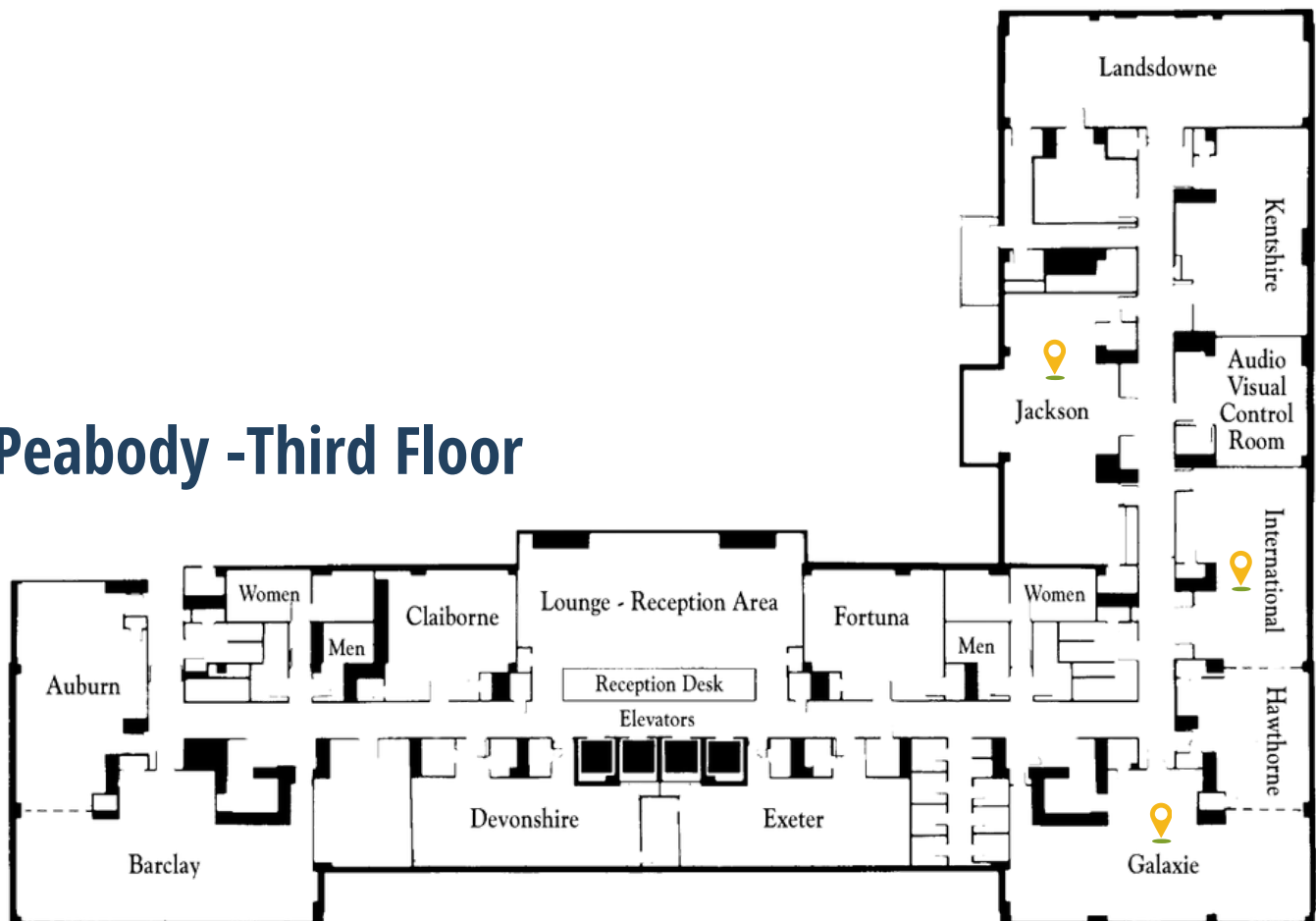
Dr. Amany Saleh is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Comparative Education at the Center of Excellence in Education at Arkansas State University. Dr. Saleh is an Oxford Fellow Scholar. She is the founder of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education* (JISE). Saleh also serves on the editorial boards of nine national and global journals. She has over sixty peer-reviewed articles and ten book chapters published. In 2023, she co-edited a volume titled, "Online teaching and learning in Asian Higher Education: Pedagogical approaches to classroom practices" published by Palgrave MacMillan. Additionally, she co-edited "The French Education Handbook" published by STARSCOLARS Press in 2024. Her research interests include curriculum modeling, reflective practices, online teaching methods, and comparative education policies.

The Peabody Hotel Map

Mezzanine and 5th floor



Peabody -Third Floor



KPCEL CHARACTER WALKS



Join your fellow KPCEL community members for a tour of schools that *live* their commitment to character every day. Following the site visit, engage in a dynamic, facilitated discussion where you can unpack key insights, explore best practices, and gain diverse perspectives from fellow higher ed and K-12 educators. This is your chance to dive deeper, ask questions, and reflect on how character-driven practices can inform and inspire your own work! This fall, take advantage of one of the two opportunities to visit character-focused K-12 schools.

Birmingham, AL

September 8 - 10, 2025

Edgewood Elementary School &
Louis Pizitz Middle School
Public district schools



MIAMI, FL

November 6 - 7, 2025

True North Classical Academy
Classical charter school



SPACE IS VERY LIMITED!
LET US KNOW YOU'RE
INTERESTED BY FILLING OUT
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THIS IS NOT A FULL
REGISTRATION—JUST A WAY
TO INDICATE YOUR INTENT.



PHOENIX, AZ

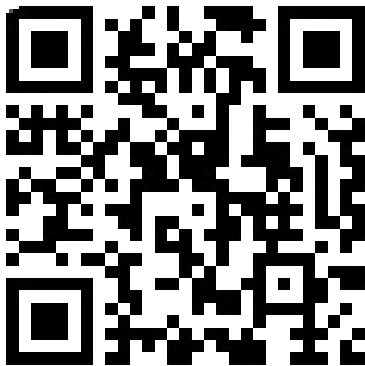
Save the date! March 1-2, 2026

Prior to the 2026 KPCEL Conference, character walks will be hosted at both K-12 and higher education institutions. More details to come!

Thank You

We value your feedback!

Please use this QR code to tell us about your experience at the 2025 KPCEL Conference.



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SAVE THE DATE
2026 KPCEL Conference
March 2 - 4 , 2026

