



Student Success: Are Certain Values and Principles Essential?



Student success is extremely important, but what do we mean by success, and what values and principles shape how students pursue it? This reflection invites us to think critically about the values and principles we encourage as we support students in becoming not only accomplished, but responsible and trustworthy members of society.

Values Shape Action

Our values and principles profoundly influence the actions we take, often without our full awareness. This raises important questions for those of us who work with students: Are some values and principles better guides for action than others? Is it judgmental to say that a choice is right or wrong? Who are we to make that judgment?

In a [January 2026 interview with Jake Tapper of CNN](#), Stephen Miller (White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Homeland Security Advisor) stated:

"... we live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world..."

Regardless of one's political views, statements like this invite reflection. Are these the values we want students to internalize as guides for how to live, lead, and succeed? Could these values be enacted for positive change? Can values and principles be meaningfully evaluated, or are they entirely subjective?

Testing Values in Everyday Life

One way to examine any set of values is to imagine applying them consistently.

If strength, force, and power were our ultimate guides—rather than tools in service of other values and principles—would it be acceptable to take from others simply because we could? What if everyone acted this way? What would the consequences be for individuals, groups, and society as a whole?

These questions help make clear that values and principles are not abstract; they shape real behavior and real outcomes for ourselves and others.

In many cases, the ethical challenge is not a lack of ambition or good intentions, but a failure to pause and reflect on impact. Harmful actions do not need to be intentional. Well-meaning people can drift into unethical outcomes when they do not slow down to consider how their personal definitions of success affect others. Furthermore, good ethical reasoning is not arbitrary.

Ethical judgments can be supported with reasons and evidence. Ethics is not simply a matter of opinion; it is a practice of thinking carefully about how our actions affect others. These habits of reasoning matter beyond campus as well. Consider a student asked during an internship to increase children's engagement on a social media platform to boost profits, regardless of the impact on those children. If refusing could cost the student their internship, is it enough to ask only, "What advances my career?" or "What supports my personal definition of success?"

Right vs. Right, Right vs. Wrong

Some decisions are largely matters of personal preference or cultural context. Reasonable people may disagree about whether it is better to move away from family for an opportunity or stay close to home, or about which flavor of ice cream tastes best. Ethicist Rushworth Kidder describes these as "Right vs. Right" decisions—situations involving preferences or competing goods rather than clear harm.

Other choices, however, involve "Right vs. Wrong." History illustrates why ethical reasoning cannot be reduced to personal or cultural preference alone. The United States did not allow women to vote until 1920. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has denied girls and women access to education and much more. If right and wrong were merely matters of opinion, we would have no basis for calling women's suffrage progress or such restrictions unjust.

This distinction matters deeply for our work with students. Is it enough to help students achieve any goal they define as success, regardless of how that success is pursued or whom it affects? This is not a call to impose a single definition of success, but an invitation to examine how different definitions of success shape real-world impact.

Consider a few student-related examples:

- What if success for a student means winning a student government election at any cost, including intentionally sabotaging a rival's campaign?
- What if success for another student means abruptly stepping away from important commitments when a better opportunity for their "personal success" appears—knowingly or unknowingly placing an unfair burden on others who depended on that commitment?
- What if success for another student means becoming a social media influencer without pausing to consider how their content may negatively affect others' body image or mental health?

A Practical Path Forward

Engaging with ethics does not require turning faculty, staff, or students into moral experts, nor does it mean handing out rigid rulebooks. Ethics is often misunderstood as a list of prohibitions, but it is better understood as a way of thinking critically about how to live and lead well, which can be very freeing. As Mason student Afsana Ahmadi has expressed, “Ethics isn’t about blindly following rules or saying anything goes; it’s about balancing principles and adapting to the situation.”

Ethical reflection can help students—and all of us—build trust, navigate conflict, find purpose, and act with integrity.

Three enduring ethical lenses offer a helpful starting point:

- **Character:** What kind of person should I be (e.g., compassionate, fair, honest, respectful, responsible)?
- **Code:** What if everyone did this? Would it respect others’ rights?
- **Consequences:** What will produce the most benefit and least harm over time for all who might be impacted?

These approaches, drawn from over 2,000 years of moral philosophy, provide a shared language without demanding uniform answers—an approach known as moral pluralism.



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Toward a Shared Commitment

There are many ways to define success, but they are not all equally ethical. One person’s success can undermine another’s well-being. By engaging more intentionally with values and principles, we can support student success in ways that are not only effective, but fair and sustainable.

Helping students think critically about ethics is not about telling them what to think. It is about equipping them to reason well, recognize impact, and pursue success we can all be proud of.

5As of Ethical Living and Leading

The 5As are adapted from James Rest’s Four Component Model of Morality (Rest, 1982). Research indicates that competence in one of the first 4As does not necessarily predict competence in another (You and Bebeau, 2013).

For example, a person could be excellent at moral reasoning (**Analysis**), but not actually follow through on their decisions (**Action**). Deciding what’s the right thing to do (**Analysis**) doesn’t mean it gets done (**Action**). The new 5th component (**Adaptation**) emphasizes the importance of reflection and continual growth. In order to develop as ethical leaders, we suggest focusing on all 5As.

How Do You Make Decisions?

Ethics provides the light for life, leadership

TAKE 5As of Ethical Leadership

5

Awareness Who/what could be affected & how?
Aspiration Am I prioritizing what’s right?
Analysis What ethical principles can help? over →
Action How can I follow through even if it’s hard?
Adaptation How can I improve future decisions?

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5Cs of Analysis: Questions to Consider

CHARACTER What kind of person should I be? (e.g., compassionate, fair, honest, respectful, responsible)
CODE What if everyone did this? Would it respect others’ rights & not just use others?
CONSEQUENCES What will produce the most benefit & least harm over time for all impacted?
CARE How can I treat others as I/they would like to be treated?
CONSULT Who will help me consider various perspectives & avoid harmful biases?

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Interested in discussing more?

Please reach out to Dr. Nick Lennon, Co-Director for the Center for Leadership and Intercultural Engagement, if you would like to discuss any of these ideas, or if you would like resources for helping students to think critically about how their impact.