

Character Intervention Full Grants Call for Proposals

Funding Initiative: Character Strength Interventions for Adolescents: Engaging Scholars and Practitioners to Promote Virtue Development

Up to five \$150,000-\$300,000 awards for 2-year projects

Summary

Baylor University welcomes proposals for the “Character Strength Interventions for Adolescents: Engaging Scholars and Practitioners to Promote Virtue Development – Full Interventions” funding initiative. We aim to support 3–5 research projects of \$150,000–300,000 for up to 2 years in length. We have a total of \$800,000 in available funding to give in these awards. Funded projects will be conducted by teams made up of scholars and youth-serving practitioners to develop and test scientifically rigorous virtue interventions for adolescents that can be implemented in diverse youth-serving settings (primarily serving 13-18 year olds). Interventions should target the development of one or more of the following virtues: love, gratitude, hope, patience, generosity, joy, wisdom, and forgiveness. Projects that examine how spirituality and transcendent purpose affect the efficacy of virtue interventions will be viewed favorably. Award winners will attend two conferences: one mid-project conference in November 2019 (in Temecula, CA) and one capstone conference in September 2021 (likely in Los Angeles, CA area), along with grantees from another funding initiative related to character development in youth. Inquiries should be directed to character_intervention@baylor.edu. This call for proposals is made possible through a generous grant from The John Templeton Foundation, and it is hosted by Baylor University’s Psychology and Neuroscience Department.

Deadline for Applications

May 1, 2019

Background

Since the late nineties, a panoply of positive psychological interventions that foster character strengths in adults have been developed (e.g., Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2012; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), but few interventions have been developed or tested for adolescents. The profound physical, cognitive, and social changes associated with adolescence provide a window of opportunity for shaping the habits and moral identity necessary for the formation of virtues (Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Schnitker, Houlterberg, Dyrness, & Redmond, 2017). Due to advances in cognitive abilities, adolescents are able to think about the world in more complex ways, intentionally alter their own behavior, and integrate meaningful narratives into their self-identity (Smetana, 1989; Steinberg, 2011). They are also receiving continuous messages from a growing social network (e.g., peers, coaches, youth leaders) that become internalized as a part of their self-concept and influence their habitual behaviors (Steinberg et al., 2006). Thus, there is great potential to influence the development of character strengths during this developmental period.

Some successful attempts have been made to develop character strength interventions for youth (e.g., Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Gollwitzer, Oettingen, Kirby, Duckworth, & Mayer, 2011), but many more interventions are necessary to provide a sufficient collection of youth-focused character-building activities that can be administered in many differing contexts. Most existing character development interventions are meant to be administered as classroom curriculum or in formal educational settings (e.g., Challen, Machin, & Gillham, 2014; Froh, Miller, & Snyder, 2007; Proctor et al., 2011; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009), and significant strides have been made to promote school-based interventions (c.f., www.characterlab.org). However, virtue development takes place in a variety of youth contexts, including athletic teams, extracurricular activities, religious organizations, online, or in the home. Thus, the goal of this project is to mobilize scholars and practitioners to design

and test contextually relevant character strength interventions that can be used in the settings adolescents inhabit in their daily lives.

Creating Contextually Relevant Interventions through the Scholar-Practitioner Model of Investigation

Although the scientific validation of virtue interventions is an important endeavor in its own right, interventions will not actually bring about change in the real world unless they align with the contextual features of adolescents' lives. Relational developmental systems theory as well as research from the positive youth development literature maintains that it is essential to attend to the bi-directional relationships between an adolescent and his/her social and cultural environments (Lerner, 2006). Character strengths do not develop in a vacuum; instead, they are components of a multifaceted developmental system (Lerner & Schmid Calina, 2014). Thus, interventions to promote character development must attend to the contextual features of the environments in which they are developed and implemented.

Traditionally, scientific intervention studies are conducted in highly controlled settings, and then practitioners are delivered an intervention and instructed that maintaining fidelity is the most important factor in implementation. This model rarely works because the interventions often were created by minimizing rather than attending to context. Practitioners become frustrated because the interventions do not translate to their settings and either abandon the activity or change the intervention without intentional planning. Several recent studies have demonstrated that careful program implementation and intervention contextualization are critical for success and can help practitioners avoid these pitfalls (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000).

Effective scholar-practitioner models are needed to integrate the wealth of experience and practical knowledge from youth workers with known theoretical models and rigorous science from research. Further, the reciprocal feedback in these teams allow for continual evaluations of what works in specific contexts and allows for the adaptation based on testing for effectiveness (Durlak, 2016). To do this well, researchers must engage experts in adolescent environments. We believe youth practitioners (i.e., youth leaders and ministers, coaches, teachers, and other youth serving professionals) are the prime choice for this role because (a) they have a wealth of practical knowledge built from their intimate interactions with youth and (b) they often oversee the implementation of interventions that scientists and others have created. Thus, we promote the scholar-practitioner model of intervention development whereby practitioners and scholars work with each other throughout all steps of creating and testing interventions.

In addition to scientifically sound interventions, the proposal guidelines will also require grantees to create implementation plans for how their interventions should be translated in other contexts. The plans will need to address the eight major components of program implementation: fidelity, dosage, quality of delivery, adaptation, participant engagement, program differentiation, monitoring of control conditions, and program reach (Durlak, 2016).

Defining Virtues: The Importance of Attending to Spirituality, Religion, and Transcendent Purpose

Defining virtues as a psychological construct and delineating the key elements of virtue and character strength development have been somewhat contentious pursuits in the social sciences. Few cohesive models of virtues exist, and criticisms of the ways in which virtues are defined and measured are myriad. Critics of character constructs often bemoan the "bag of virtues" approach, lack of attention to moral identity and purpose, and decontextualized measurement (Nucci, 2016).

To address these concerns, the host team has built a cohesive model of virtue development that integrates key insights from personality theory, positive psychology, and positive youth development (see [here](#) for full description of the theoretical model). In this model, the host team operationalizes virtues as hybrid personality units within McAdams and Pals's (2006) personality theory, which identifies three units/levels of personality: stable traits, characteristic adaptation, and narrative identity. Although virtues have often been described and measured as traits in positive psychology, classical conceptualizations of virtues related to habitus postulate that virtues are habits acquired across time through intentional

practices (MacIntyre, 2007; Brown, Spezio, Reimer, Van Slyke, & Peterson, 2013). This description, as well as McAdams and Pals's (2006) own designation, indicate that virtues would be better classified as characteristic adaptations, which are the transactional units of personality that describe what personality "does," in contrast to traits, which describe what personality "is" or "has" (Cantor, 1990).

However, the host team contends that virtues are more than just characteristic adaptations. MacIntyre (2007) argues that virtues can only be enacted in the context of a community-based narrative supporting their importance. Virtues are not just psychological habits or adaptations devoid of moral meaning. Instead, to be truly virtuous, these adaptations or habits must be connected to a particular type of narrative identity or self-concept—namely an identity that values something beyond the self (Brown et al., 2013; Hampson, 2012). Thus, any inquiry into the study of virtue development in adolescence must attend to the ways the social context provides meaning that extends beyond the self.

Historically, such self-transcendent narratives have been provided by religious traditions and institutions, and religious participation still provides youth with meaning and purpose today (King & Furrow, 2004). However, transcendent purpose is addressed in a variety of youth contexts and is not exclusive to explicitly religious settings. Researchers have found that both religious and nonreligious youth can have a deep sense of spirituality, which includes elements of transcendence (connection beyond the self), fidelity (resolute commitment to beliefs/values), and action that lives out responsibility to the "other" (King, Clardy, & Ramos, 2014).

Under this model of virtue by which character development encompasses the cultivation of positive habits in connection to a transcendent narrative identity, it is essential for researchers to attend to variables related to spirituality, religion, transcendence, and/or purpose when designing and testing virtue interventions. Previous research on therapeutic interventions (Kennedy, Macnab, & Ross, 2015) and the host team's theoretical model (Schnitker, Houlberg, Dyrness, & Redmond, 2017) suggest that virtue building activities will be more effective when youth already have a transcendent identity and/or when the intervention includes components that attend to transcendent purpose and spirituality. Thus, the review process will favor proposals that address how spirituality and transcendent purpose affect the efficacy of virtue interventions in adolescents.

Timeline and Application Instructions

Applicants should submit the following materials:

- A description of the work to be carried out, not to exceed 5,000 words (references do not have to be counted in this total). The description should include the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, a description and rationale for the virtue(s) targeted in the intervention, a summary of the research design, and a description of the intervention context.
- A project abstract of up to 500 words that explains the project and its significance to non-academics, and that could be published on the project website, possibly published in John Templeton Foundation materials, and included in publicity materials if the proposal is funded.
- A timeline (template provided).
- A detailed budget spreadsheet (template provided), between \$150,000 and \$300,000 in total costs (direct and indirect), with an accompanying narrative (template provided) explaining line items, not to exceed three single-spaced pages. **Overhead is limited to 5%**, and funds cannot be used for major equipment purchases. Necessary project-specific costs for lab/space use and administrative support may be included as direct costs and must be justified.
- Approval of the relevant university signing officials.
- CV(s) or resume(s) of scholar and practitioner project leaders and a 500-word statement describing the capacity of the proposed team to perform collaborative work together.

Full proposals must be submitted by email attachment to **character_intervention@baylor.edu**. The words "Full Proposal" should appear in the email subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and PDF. Questions about full proposals can be sent to the submission address. Full proposals must be

received no later than **May 1, 2019** at midnight Pacific Time. An acknowledgement email will be sent within seven days of receiving the materials.

All teams must include at least one scholar with a PhD or an equivalent terminal degree (e.g., EdD, PsyD) and at least one senior or highly experienced youth-serving practitioner (e.g., a director level or equivalent). At least one of the project co-leaders must be located at a university or nonprofit organization. All applications must be submitted in English and all payments will be made in US dollars.

The Project Leader of a funded project must commit to the following:

- 1) Submit semi-annual and final reports, as well as semi-annual and final expenditure reports. The reports should not exceed 2 pages and should detail the outcomes of the funded project. Templates will be provided.
- 2) Attend, present initial findings, and engage in workgroups at a conference in November 2019 (in Temecula, CA), where Project Leaders from two simultaneous funding initiatives related to “Character Strength Interventions in Adolescents: Engaging Scholars and Practitioners to Promote Virtue Development” will be in attendance. Airfare, lodging, and onsite meals will be covered, and provided by the host team.
- 3) Attend, present findings, and engage in workgroups at a conference in September 2021 (likely in Los Angeles, CA area), where Project Leaders from two simultaneous funding initiatives related to “Character Strength Interventions in Adolescents: Engaging Scholars and Practitioners to Promote Virtue Development” will be in attendance. Airfare, lodging, and onsite meals will be covered and provided by the host team.
- 4) Consent to have project presentation at the final conference be videotaped and publicly displayed.
- 5) Submit guide and implementation plan of a scalable character intervention. The implementation plan should outline the major steps in the process of implementing the intervention based on the steps identified in the Quality Implementation framework (Meyers, Durlak, & Wandersman, 2012).
- 6) Submit a chapter for the *Virtue Interventions for Practitioners* e-book by September 30, 2021. (Additional details will be provided.)
- 7) Notify the Project at **character_intervention@baylor.edu** of all conference presentations, papers, and books that arise from the funded research in the final report and four months following the project end date.

Submissions will be reviewed based upon the following criteria:

Potential impact
 Fit with program aims
 Scholarly merit
 Scientific rigor of study design
 Attention to faith/spirituality variables
 Strength of scholar-practitioner partnership
 Capacity for success
 Creativity/novelty
 Feasibility
 Scalability of the intervention
 Responsible budget
 Addresses the needs of an underserved population

Finalists will be announced June 21, 2019.

Revisions will need to be returned to grant team by July 15, 2019.

Awards will be announced August 1, 2019.

Grant start date is October 1, 2019.