Cultivating Character and Virtue through Liberal Arts

Good character is something that we have to continually strive for.  It involves a constant evaluation and adaption of the values that we place as a priority in our lives.  To accomplish this constant cycle, we need to place ourselves in environments that support ongoing growth and challenge us to think critically about our own values as well as the values that those around us bring to the table.  A liberal arts college is designed to provide an environment that cultivates that critical thinking for all of their students both in and out of the classroom.

A liberal arts education pushes students to think beyond their own personal values.  The members of the community seek to help others better understand their own personal values and at the same time seek to better understand the values of those around them and how their values have been shaped by differing life experiences.  Therefore, the liberal arts community assists in the development of good character by encouraging openness and a deeper desire to understand others values and how they reflect their culture and life experiences.

By instilling a desire to understand the values and beliefs of those around us, the liberal arts education empowers students to cultivate the value of respect.  This occurs in the classroom, on campus, in the immediate community, and in all parts of life that the members of the community venture into.  I personally have seen this in the quality of debates and discussions that occur not only in classes for my major but also in my advanced general education courses.  The classes that force the students in the liberal arts outside the "comfort zone" of their major challenge us to grow into more well-rounded individuals.  We learn to appreciate that to each situation there are many different views all shaped by the perspective you bring to the table whether that is academically, culturally, or otherwise.

This respect extends beyond just the classroom.  The broadest character growth my liberal arts experience has given me comes through my service.  Loras College has given me the ability to volunteer in the community beyond our campus in lower socio-economic schools, with people of different ethnicity, and with children and families in different parts of the United States through service trips.  Through this volunteer work, I have been challenged to consider learning as something much greater than memorizing facts.  Learning is an ongoing process that may begin in the classroom but is only completed when you question what you have learned previously based upon new experiences.

One way I experienced this was through a service trip I took to work in the schools and community in Morton, Mississippi.  The people I met there often on the service seemed to share very little in common with me.  The community was, in general, characterized as lower income, minority, few high school graduates, believed in corporal punishment in the schools, and not Catholic.  By spending time with the people in the community, I was at first awestruck by our differences, but in talking to and working with the members of the community I saw that not only did we have many similar values but they possessed values that I wished I too was stronger in.  My service allowed me to understand that the surface differences made it possible for me to grow in my values and characters my questioning how certain values I saw demonstrated in others could fit into my own life.  Therefore, I believe that the greatest contribution to my character is that it has created is my ability to understand that questioning and reflection upon your values is within itself a very important value.