

Character and . . .

Connection

Volume 11 / 2025

LIZA D. JOHNSON,
MARY K. BRYANT,
& ANNE E. FUNKE

*A Letter from the Heart: An Honest
Message About College, Character, and
Who You're Becoming*

Articles

ANNE E. FUNKE

*A Culture of C.A.R.E.: Building Character
and Connection with the Women's
Volleyball Team at the University of
Dubuque*

JOE KLINEBRIEL

*A Community Connection: Building the
Virtues of Character through Theater*

NICHOLAS A. ELDER

*Ghosting and Graffiti: Character
Lessons from Ancient Roman Social
Media*

Response

ANNA HAVERLAND

*Mirrors of Meaning: Character and
Connection through Mentorship,
Theater, and Social Media*



Editors

Liza D. Johnson, Executive Editor

Mary K. Bryant, Managing Editor

The faculty and student essays presented here emerge from an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character & Leadership or the University of Dubuque.

Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character & Leadership

University of Dubuque

2000 University Avenue

Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)

wendt@dbq.edu (e-mail)

www.dbq.edu/wendt (website)

Copyright Notice

Copyright ©2025 by the Wendt Center for Character & Leadership at the University of Dubuque; all rights reserved. Brief portions of material in this publication may be copied and quoted without further permission, with appropriate citation of the sources of the excerpt included in the copy. Copies may be made for classroom use if 1) the material is distributed without charge or fee above duplication costs; 2) the material includes full bibliographic citation and the following statement: "Copyright by the Wendt Center for Character & Leadership at the University of Dubuque. Reproduced by permission of the Wendt Center." This policy extends also to electronic copies or links posted in online course management or e-reserve systems. Please send notification of your use to wendt@dbq.edu. This statement serves as the Wendt Center for Character & Leadership's official permission for using material under the conditions specified above.

The Character and . . . Journal is published by the Wendt Center for Character & Leadership at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa, and uses short notes and bibliography in the style of the 17th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

A Culture of C.A.R.E.

Building Character and Connection with the Women’s Volleyball Team at the University of Dubuque

Anne E. Funke

Abstract

*“A Culture of C.A.R.E.” focuses on the creation of a character-based wellbeing initiative with the University of Dubuque women’s volleyball team. Rooted in the virtues of **Compassion, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence**, the C.A.R.E. program integrates emotional intelligence practices to strengthen relationships, trust, and team culture. Through collaboration, reflective dialogue, and vulnerability exercises, athletes redefined excellence beyond performance, emphasizing growth, integrity, and connection. The program has shown measurable cultural shifts—greater cohesion, empathy, and mutual support—and inspired interest across other teams. The article concludes that cultivating character through connection can transform not only athletics but a broader campus culture.*

Introduction: The Power of Connection in a High-Pressure Context

I identify as an educator at heart, and the value of relationships and connection are central to how I do my work and view my vocation. This article offers a story of serendipitous timing and profound connections—connections that have been a tool for transformation for one athletic team at the University of Dubuque.

Here at UD, over 60% of our current student body identify as athletes. For those students reading this article, this will come as no shock to you. These student-athletes are highly visible and deeply embedded in the life of our campus. They are no



*Student-athletes
are no strangers
to pressure.*

strangers to pressure and demands on their time as they balance academics, practices, competitions, lifting schedules, social obligations, and family responsibilities. They embody excellence in motion, often praised and admired for their drive and discipline. And yet, beneath the surface of achievement and success, many of these students are wrestling with deeper fears and worries: self-doubt, anxiety, burnout, and disconnection.

For the past two years, I have had the privilege of working alongside and learning from one such group—the UD women’s volleyball team. Together we have embarked on a mission to build something deep, real, and transformative: a culture of wellbeing and connection rooted in character. Through the development of a character-based program grounded in the values of Compassion, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence (C.A.R.E.), we set out to not only improve team dynamics but to also foster the kind of relationships that sustain wellbeing, trust, growth, and success on and off the court.



This is the story of how it all began—with a conversation in the bleachers—and how it evolved into a transformed team culture grounded in emotional insight, shared vulnerability, and the bold belief that connection is the most powerful catalyst of all.

The Problem: Unseen Struggles Beneath the Surface

While research shows that student-athletes often outperform their non-athlete peers in key areas such as motivation, time management, and even graduation rates,¹ those same studies also point to the unique pressures they face, the significant physical, mental, and emotional strain they endure. Being a student-athlete isn’t just about playing a sport—it’s a lifestyle that demands emotional resilience, consistent performance, and constant time juggling. They are praised for strength but rarely given space to express vulnerability.

At UD, our student-athletes are surrounded by adults who care, from coaches, to athletic trainers, to professors and advisors. And yet, it can be all too easy to misread their confidence and composure as a sign that they are

thriving in every way. Particularly for young women, the pressure to have it all together can be stifling.

Before I get ahead of myself, it's important here to share that this volleyball team inspired my dissertation research, where I examined emotional intelligence (EQ) competencies and the concept of wellbeing, based on Six Seconds: The Emotional Intelligence Network's framework.² Their EQ framework highlights eight EQ competencies and four success factors that all impact one's overall wellbeing and sense of purpose.³ In addition to deeply inspiring me in their interviews with their strength, resilience, humor, intelligence, and compassion, a few themes appeared in the quantitative and qualitative research grounded in Six Seconds' framework. I'll paraphrase and simplify those themes from the research:

1. The athletes that participated understood that wellbeing is holistic. Yet, when measured quantitatively against factors like health, relationships, and quality of life, their collective wellbeing score was the lowest. Wellbeing in the research was defined as the capacity to maintain optimal energy and functioning.
2. The participants strongly identified as athletes, recognizing how important this identity was to their senses of self. And the higher their EQ, the more they recognized *other* parts of their lives that made them who they were and fueled their self-confidence.
3. The athletes who participated really wanted to strengthen their EQ and see that it mattered as an athlete. They were also willing to put in the work to improve it!
4. Navigating Emotions was the most challenging aspect measured for participants overall (against other competencies like Exercising Empathy, Exercising Optimism, for example). They also recognized that their weakness in navigating emotions negatively impacted their wellbeing and performance as an athlete.
5. Relationships matter a heck of a lot when it comes to their personal wellbeing, *and* they acknowledged this as an area in which they wanted to grow.

Beyond the research, I have had countless conversations with the young women on the volleyball team. The same clear picture emerged: behind the strength they show on the court are students yearning to be well—mentally, emotionally, and relationally. They spoke of feeling stretched thin, of rarely having space to simply *be*, and of wanting more support to grow not just as

athletes, but as human beings. Their coach saw this reality and decided it was time to try something different.

The Origin Story: A Bleacher Conversation and Shared Vision

It started, as meaningful things often do, with a chance conversation.

One cold winter morning, while watching my son play basketball at the YMCA, I struck up a conversation with Annalee Ward, then-director of the Wendt Center for Character Education, watching her grandson play on the same team. I had recently returned to higher education after a hiatus caring for my young children and was seeking work that felt meaningful and relational.

Annalee mentioned that the women's volleyball coach, April, was looking for support for her team—specifically, a way to build character and connection “off the court.” While these student athletes had mentors and role models in their coaches and trainers, April recognized there was still room for more cohesion, community, and care for each other. She knew that working to build stronger relationships with each other and confidence within themselves would translate to a happier, healthier, and more successful team. What they truly needed was the kind of time, reflection, and presence that doesn't always come with athletic training. This opportunity felt like a perfect fit in light of my own search for meaningful work.



What transpired was a connected journey—one rooted in curiosity, conversations, mutual respect, and a shared desire to build something lasting.

That bleacher conversation quickly turned into a formal collaboration between the Wendt Center for Character Education, the volleyball team, and me, serving as the facilitator to pilot a program for the team. What transpired was not a top-down program imposed on the team, but a connected journey—one rooted in curiosity, conversations, mutual respect, and a shared desire to build something lasting.

In only one hour, April, Annalee, and I established a team creed and path forward. April and her coaching staff had decided that, moving forward, they wanted to be “A well team that functioned with C.A.R.E.” The acronym C.A.R.E. here represented their four most deeply held team virtues:

compassion, accountability, respect, and excellence. These virtues, we believed, could be explored, cultivated, developed, and practiced both in and outside of their sport. One could be a compassionate teammate after a tough loss, *and* show self-compassion after failing an exam. One could hold a teammate accountable to show up for lifts and practices on time giving full effort, *and* hold themselves accountable to show up to their work-study job three days a week. One could show respect toward conference rivals in a heated match, *and* toward fellow students holding opposing values in Worldview Seminar. One could demonstrate excellence as an outstanding athlete, performing at her peak game after game, *and* make the Dean's List at the end of term.

The next step was knowing how, when, and where to start. At the time of this collaborative conversation, volleyball was in its off-season, where goals were being set and there were less opportunities to meet as a full team. It was determined that this was the right time to gather a select group of athletes from the volleyball team to get a pulse for the team culture. What was going well? What, perhaps, wasn't? What were their goals (versus Coach's, or even mine)? There was some uncertainty on my end approaching these conversations, and a bit of imposter syndrome. Having never been a student-athlete myself, who was I to be "guiding" these young women? I'm embarrassed to say I had never watched a college volleyball game before meeting these girls, let alone known position names or plays. Would they really see any value in me facilitating these challenging conversations around transforming their team into a more connected, healthy version? All these doubts were present as I stepped into the role of planning the first C.A.R.E. conversation.

I must note: It's not lost on me that it was the power of connections that inspired this conversation turned program in the first place. Through friendships both in and outside of work spaces, Annalee, April, and I had many shared values, interests, and goals that brought this conversation to fruition.

A second, perhaps more important note: I have since learned *all* position names in the sport of volleyball, understand when to cheer or not, and have attended several college games :)

The Program Design: Building with, not for, the Team

We began with humility and intention. Despite my lack of volleyball knowledge, we proceeded planning three spring sessions to essentially lay

the groundwork for what the programming would look like for the full team in the fall. I decided to focus on the importance of authentic relationships and presence, a sense of rapport building that could be carried into the fall.

Ten student leaders representing different years and roles were invited into a pilot program that would help shape our work moving forward. Rather than assume what they needed, I asked.

What's working well on this team?

Where are the breakdowns in trust or connection?

What are your hopes for this team?

What would you need to grow—emotionally, mentally, relationally?

Their answers shaped everything. They wanted depth. They wanted real. They wanted honesty. And above all, they wanted a space that wasn't performative or transactional. They wanted to feel *known*.

My intentional stance was that I was right there learning and growing *with them*. Instead of positioning myself as an expert, I committed to showing up with consistency, respect, and a learning mindset. My position as an outsider to athletics became an asset—I could offer perspective without preconceptions. These young women didn't need me to be another coach. They needed me to be a consistent adult who saw them, believed in them, and held space for growth.



Student-athletes took ownership of the experience.

We even spent time talking about the program logistics together, discussing how many sessions would be helpful, what kind of setting would be effective, and of course, what snacks would be essential. I let students share their input every step of the way, ensuring that they could take as much

ownership of this experience as possible. When I presented their plans and reflections back to Coach, she was supportive of what we had created, and planning began.

We decided that we would meet a total of four times in the fall season after practice. These sessions would be about an hour and a half, and I would lead a variety of activities to not only redefine what it meant to be UD Volleyball,

but to practice the values we claimed were an integral part of the team’s character and culture.

C.A.R.E. in Action: The Program Model

As the Fall 2023 semester arrived, we embarked on piloting the C.A.R.E. program with the whole team—a total of 32 young women from every major, ranging from freshman to senior. Together, we started by shaping our work around the values of **Compassion, Accountability, Respect, and Excellence**—not as abstract ideals, but as connection—cultivating practices to form both the individual and the team.

Below are the definitions that the team itself came up with for each value, taking ownership of how they wanted to live these out.

Compassion: recognizing feelings (yours and others) and taking loving action

Accountability: ownership, responsibility, shared purpose

Respect: admiration and equitable/kind treatment toward someone based on their choices, their character

Excellence: being outstanding, holding yourself to the highest of standards

Within the first five minutes of our time together, I could feel the team’s investment in the work we were about to embark on together. I firmly believe this was influenced by the pre-season sessions spent building trust and a collaborative plan with the ten team leaders in the room who were now fully invested. While no two sessions were ever exactly the same, we followed a similar flow and structure each time we met. We would always begin with a check-in exercise, reflecting upon how we had been feeling emotionally, physically, mentally, even spiritually. Sometimes these check-ins were individual and other times shared with one another. We would then take some time to explore whichever value was the focus of that session.



Students reflected on practices and virtues of connection.

We began with exploring the team value of compassion by cultivating empathy for self and others. Through journaling, dialogue, and vulnerability exercises, athletes began to share their inner worlds. There was laughter, there were tears, there were even some intimate moments of truly hearing and seeing one another. Trust began to grow, and compassion became the foundation of our work, carrying throughout each of the other team values.



Teammates grew community and built trust.

As we explored accountability, we acknowledged that true connection requires honesty. The volleyball team worked on giving and receiving feedback, owning mistakes, and pausing to hear one another out before making assumptions and reacting. We were able to acknowledge that

perfection wasn't the ideal—it was about responsibility to one another as teammates and humans and toward the shared purpose of the UD volleyball team.

Respect in these sessions showed up as honoring differences—across class years, positions, personalities, and lived experiences. It also meant respecting each other's time, voice, and presence. Even small acts, like learning to actively listen or encourage a quiet teammate, became game-changing moments. I was moved by the team's definition of respect as it encompassed an *admiration for*, not just tolerance of, one another. This choice in language was evident in how they celebrated one another for who they were and how they added unique skills, talents, and gifts to the team environment and culture.

Finally, we redefined excellence as more than winning. Excellence meant growth. It meant effort. It meant bringing one's full self to each interaction, and striving for personal and collective integrity—on and off the court. We interpreted excellence therefore as loving ourselves and each other so radically that it is *worth* having hard conversations, putting in the extra effort, showing vulnerability and courage. These student-athletes were beginning to believe that they were *worth it*.

Helping the team redefine excellence beyond performance—as growth, integrity, and relational strength—helped me reflect on my own definition and beliefs around excellence in both work and life. And in order to facilitate these sessions with the team, I too had to practice and model these team values. I grew in my own ability to express compassion, listening deeply to athletes’ needs and creating safe spaces for vulnerability. I expressed accountability by encouraging honest feedback and ownership within the team while modeling consistency and integrity in my facilitation. I respected their own wisdom and knowledge and learned from them just as they learned from me. This entire experience was transformative for the student-athletes, the team, and for myself.

Outcomes & Reflections: The Shifts I Witnessed

Transformation and change didn’t happen overnight—but it was real.

As the program has evolved, so has the team. I have seen athletes initiating difficult conversations with each other. They are creating space in their busy schedules for check-ins not just about volleyball, but about life. Student-athletes are expressing that they feel like they have built a family within the team, that the C.A.R.E. program has helped them open up and build meaningful relationships with each other.

We have seen tangible shifts in team dynamics—less cliquishness, more support across class years, and a greater sense of shared purpose. But more than that, we have seen young women beginning to believe and express that who they are matters just as much as how they play.

One student recognized the commitment it took to put in the time toward a shift of team character and culture:

I think C.A.R.E. is something I’m glad our team started doing, even when it meant one more thing. We are so much closer than other teams on this campus, and it helped change my mindset and helped me find different ways to help the team and myself.

Another student focused on connections and growth:

You helped us grow so much as people and teammates. I strongly believe that what we’ve accomplished the last two years is because of our connection as a team. . . . I feel better equipped to go out into the world and function with C.A.R.E.!

A third student put simply:

C.A.R.E. has clearly made an impact on the team culture both on and off the court.

And yes, since the inception of the C.A.R.E. programming, the UD women's volleyball team has won back-to-back American Rivers Conference titles. Is that solely because of C.A.R.E.? Of course not. Their skill, leadership, and grit are extraordinary. But a team that trusts each other, that knows how to communicate and support each other—that's a different kind of unstoppable.



The team has faced setbacks and successes together.

I'm not claiming that these thirty-some young women are perfect, and I don't think they would want me to. There have been mistakes made throughout the past two years, hurt feelings, and actions that go against exactly what UD Volleyball claims to be. Developing one's character, quite frankly, isn't about perfection. It's about recognizing when mistakes and setbacks happen, reflecting and learning from those as we move forward, *together*.

This work has transformed me, too. I went in hoping to offer something of value to these students, and have come out having learned more than I could have imagined—about trust, courage, and the power of relationships and presence. I have learned to listen more and speak less. To resist the temptation to “fix” someone's problems, and instead exercise empathy. To stop making assumptions about what a “successful” student looks like, and recognize success comes in so many forms. To believe in the wisdom of students, and acknowledge they have so much to teach those of us who work with them. And to acknowledge that young women more than ever need others to support them, to celebrate them, and to see them.

I have witnessed, again and again, that when young people feel seen and supported, they thrive. I see this in my classes, in workshops, in the Wendt Character Scholar program, and even in the yoga classes I offer on campus. Connection is not a luxury or an “extra.” It's the foundation. Connection is a reciprocal gift that offers an opportunity to grow in character together, to be

fully oneself, and to know that there is someone there for you when you win and when you fail, when you're well and when you're not.

Conclusion: A Model for Character and Wellbeing Beyond Sports

There is every intention to continue offering the C.A.R.E. program to the UD volleyball team, and we have had four other athletic teams on our campus to date express interest in collaborating on similar programs and initiatives to strengthen team culture and character. We recognize that each team has its own unique needs and characteristics, and that C.A.R.E. is not a one-size-fits-all program. That said, it can be adapted and modified to meet the diverse needs of any group of students. The essence of what the C.A.R.E. program provides is an emphasis on connections and a culture of character that transcends context.



I continue to meet with the volleyball team as we carry on the work of cultivating a culture of connection and good character.

What we have begun to build with the women's volleyball team is not just a standalone program—it has become a healthy team culture shift. And while it is happening in the context of athletics, it holds relevance far beyond just the realm of college athletics. The C.A.R.E. model isn't about volleyball—it's about building a culture. It's about re-centering character, wellbeing, and connection in all areas of students' lives.

In classrooms, residence halls, student organizations—anywhere young people gather—there is an opportunity to cultivate a culture of C.A.R.E. A culture where character is not taught in isolation, but grown through relationships. A culture where connection is not a side effect, but the goal. Imagine a college environment where everyone practices wholehearted compassion, radical accountability, limitless respect, and full-throated excellence. To become a campus of C.A.R.E. where not only faculty and staff

but our students recognize the power of these character virtues and value deep connections with one another.

That's the vision. And it's possible. One team, one conversation, one connection at a time.

Anne E. Funke is Assistant Professor and Director of Worldview Studies at the University of Dubuque. She oversees the Worldview Seminar series, Personal Empowerment program, and supports campus in developing skills and strategies around character, emotional intelligence, and vocation. Anne received her Ed.D in Educational and Professional Practice, researching female student-athlete wellbeing, and loves connecting with new people.

Image Credits

pp. 29, 30, 31, 34: Photos by Anne E. Funke

p. 33: Photo by Annalee R. Ward

Notes

1. Gaston Gayles, "The Student Athlete Experience"; Gaston Gayles and Baker, "Opportunities and Challenges."
2. Funke, "Are they Well?"
3. Six Seconds: The Emotional Intelligence Network, "What Is Emotional Intelligence?"

Bibliography

Funke, Anne E. "Are They Well? Examining Emotional Intelligence Competencies of Female College Athletes." EdD diss., Antioch University, 2024. Antioch University Repository and Archive.

Gaston Gayles, J. "The Student Athlete Experience." *New Directions for Institutional Research*, no. 144 (2009), 33–41. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.311>.

Gaston Gayles, Joy, and Ashley R. Baker. "Opportunities and Challenges for First-Year Student Athletes Transitioning from High School to College." *New Directions for Student Leadership*, no. 147 (2015): 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yl.20142>.

Six Seconds: The Emotional Intelligence Network. "What Is Emotional Intelligence?" Accessed June 20, 2025. <https://www.6seconds.org/emotional-intelligence/>.

