Social Responsibility Education to Combat Narcissism After the Pandemic: Reinventing Graduate Attributes in Higher Learning

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The COVID-19 Pandemic is predicted to end soon. However, its impacts on human existence and social survival have just begun to emerge. Bluntly, the COVID-19 Pandemic told us that life and death education could not wait.

Mental health needs among college students are rising [1]. COVID-19 complicated this issue by adding uncertainties to career developments, damaging confidence in future prosperity, and questioning the meaning of life. As students were unprepared to face adversity, they turned to self-hate on one extreme, and self-love, narcissism, on the other [2].

Twenge and Campbell published the book "Narcissism Epidemic in the Age of Entitlement" in 2009. They alerted that social networking sites have worked as a feedback loop for narcissism and extensive smartphone use was driving young people in America to "the brink of a mental health crisis" [3]. Their arguments did not go unchallenged by other scholars [4,5]. Although Twenge and Campbell's approach was criticized for a mono-casual explanation of narcissism, her sensitivity to digital influences on humanity should be admired. As Oster and Hine (2011) stated, "this narcissism may influence students to avoid uncomfortable challenges, thereby having an impact on our educational work as student affairs administrators" (pp 385) [6].

Trzesniewski, Donnellan and Robins (2010) confirmed that senior high school students in America were more cynical and less trusting than previous generations [7]. Will COVID-19 push young people towards higher narcissism and lower commitment to the social good? There is no definite answer at this stage of research. Narcissism is a spectrum. Shreds of evidence only showed that collective narcissism has hindered pandemic solidarity [8,9] and that the COVID-19 crisis was darker for some, as narcissism and Machiavellianism predicted greater negative effects and perceptions of threat [10].

Do universities perceive themselves as having a role in preparing students for adversity? At UIC, a study compared Graduate Attributes (GAs) of universities in China and overseas [11]. The top 50 Chinese universities by QS(Asia) and the top 50 Overseas counterparts by QS International of 2019, were included as a sample. The Top 5 most frequently included GAs among overseas universities were Excellence (f = 15), Global Perspectives (f = 15), Creativity (f = 14), Research ability (f = 14), and Learning ability (f = 11). For Chinese universities, the Top 5 were Innovations (f = 47), Global Perspectives (f = 39), Knowledgeable (f = 37), Practicality (f = 33) and Social Responsibility (f = 29). Overseas Universities were more heterogeneous in the adoption of GAs while their Chinese counterparts were very homogeneous. High on both lists were global perspectives, innovativeness, and abilities indicative of an instrumental orientation. "Student Resiliencies" and "Well-being" did not appear on both lists. Physical health was ranked 11th of GAs by Chinese universities with 17 counts. Mental health needs were not explicitly acknowledged on both lists. This is probably unacceptable if measured against the student-centered GAs structure proposed by Simon Barrie and others (2009) [12].

The adverse effects of narcissism also involved aggression, a review of 437 studies found [13]. How could we counteract the effects of narcissism? In another study at UIC [14], correlation analysis indicated that College Engagement mildly correlated with Resilience [r (2710) = 0.279, p < 0.01**] and moderately correlated with Character Strengths [r (2710) = 0.508, p < 0.01**]. Resilience was measured

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by Wagnild's Resilience Scale, and "Character strengths" were measured by the Value in Action Inventory. Interestingly, the cultivation of "Social Responsibility Attribute" has both societal and personal benefits since it strengthens individual resilience. Citizenship building, by promoting positive thinking and a sense of community belongingness is, therefore, proposed to mitigate the destructive effects of collective narcissism.

Hong Kong Baptist University defines Citizenship, one of their 7 graduate attributes adopted by UIC, as a sense of upholding professional ethics and social responsibility consistent with their roles as local and global citizens [15]. Many overseas universities have listed "Ethics and Social Responsibilities" in their GAs, but seldom were its effects on positive personality stressed. The University of Manchester is unique in British higher education in having social responsibility as one of its three core strategic goals [16]. Social and psychological developments of youth actually go together. The University of Chicago (1931) has introduced the educational model of a Core Curriculum for its undergraduates [17]. In parallel, a core set of social-emotional skills, including Collective Awareness, Collective Leadership, and Citizenship, should be part of future College GAs.

Gabriel Donleavy (2012) reviewed the proclaimed graduate attributes of Australian Universities and gladly concluded that humanism was not been replaced by employability [18]. Sharing the same mission it is hoped that in reinventing higher learning, the flag of "working together towards the benefits of all human existence" will be firmly held.

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