

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Greg Beabout (Professor of Philosophy, SLU), Rachel Douchant (Professor of Philosophy, Lindenwood University), Chad Flanders (Associate Professor, SLU Law), Michael Strong (founder of several schools based on Paideia/virtue culture principles and author of books and articles on cultivating virtue through schools), and Bonnie Wilson (Associate Professor of Economics, SLU) aim to initiate a research program on virtue cultures and communities - ways of being and living that support and sustain lives characterized by excellence, practical wisdom, and flourishing.

Coherent virtue cultures and communities are arguably essential for healthy human development and thriving. Modern intellectual and economic liberalism is likewise associated with profound social benefits. Unfortunately, as liberalism has advanced it has undermined the traditional norms that historically supported virtue cultures and communities. As such, as liberalism has advanced, virtue cultures and communities have languished. The proposed research program is predicated on the assumption that there is no necessary trade-off between liberalism and virtue cultures and communities, and seeks to identify the practical means via which the goods of virtue cultures and communities can be reconstructed in the context of a liberal society.

As a first step towards the development of this research program, we seek a Spark Grant to bring Michael Strong to St. Louis, July 24-25. We plan to use this face-to-face opportunity to plan the second step in the development of this research program: an interdisciplinary Liberty Fund-style colloquium. The colloquium will bring together a group of potential collaborators from different institutions to discuss a shared set of readings related to the topic of virtue cultures and communities. Key aims of the colloquium are (1) to develop relationships and solidify key collaborators who will contribute to the research program, and (2) to provide the foundation for a significant external funding proposal to support the research program. The colloquium itself will require substantial funds. Potential sponsors include the Liberty Fund and the Koch Foundation.

The overall project is a long-term one – five to ten years. Our aim is to secure funding from a source such as the Templeton Foundation to support an interdisciplinary research program in collaboration with interested and like-minded scholars around the world.

The proposed research program is interdisciplinary. It will entail collaboration of scholars in the areas economics, law, philosophy, and also in political science, sociology, and theology. Most of the collaborations will be new, and involve individuals from multiple institutions.

The proposed research program entails a new opportunity for at least three SLU faculty in different units – Greg Beabout in the College of Arts & Sciences, Chad Flanders in the Law School, and Bonnie Wilson in the John Cook School of Business. Greg and Bonnie have previously collaborated on small research projects related to sustainability and exchange relationships and virtue.¹ They have also co-taught two interdisciplinary courses for undergraduates, one on markets and Catholic social thought and another on labor economics and the vocation of work. The proposed research program on virtue communities will be the first large-scale research collaboration with potential for external funding for the three.

¹ Beabout, G. and B. Wilson. 2014. Sustainability and the Proper Role of Business Leaders. *Journal of Jesuit Business Education* 5: 51-69; and Beabout, G. and B. Wilson. 2017. Occupy SLU: Exchange, Entrepreneurship, Virtue, Jesuit Charism. *Jesuit Higher Education*.

Main tasks for the research program include: (1) creation of a conceptual identity associated with the creation and re-invigoration of virtue cultures and communities; (2) development of an empirical research program to identify the human benefits of virtue cultures and communities, as well as an ongoing research program to identify most effective practices; (3) construction of a practical effort to support and nurture real-world pilot programs; (4) production of a broader awareness campaign so that more people understand the entire program and why it is immediately relevant to human lives today. Beyond general themes, specific program areas to be analyzed and researched include: virtue communities and parenting; virtue communities and schooling; virtue communities and crime reduction; virtue communities, health, and well-being; virtue communities and mutual aid; virtue communities and happiness; and no doubt more. There are also provocative boundaries associated with: virtue communities and religion; virtue communities, sex, and the family; virtue communities and tradition.

While the general project is quite encompassing in terms of potential program areas, we seek to focus conversation on a particular strategy for advancing virtue cultures and communities in the context of liberal societies; namely, the development of an institutional environment in which entrepreneurs create healthy, new communities that transmit and nurture a wide array of virtue cultures. This strategy is grounded in MacIntyre's critique of modernity and in Nozick's framework for utopia.² MacIntyre and Nozick offer a seemingly unlikely and perhaps surprising combination of ideas in which to ground a project. Arguably though, the absence of an existing vision for a liberal society with a rich and thick array of virtue cultures and communities suggests that the default mental models of current ideological communities - mainstream progressivism, conservatives, and libertarianism - are insufficient for progress. The proposed research program is thus built on the hope of progress through a new paradigm in support of virtue cultures and communities in liberal social orders.

² MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, IN; and Nozick, R. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Basic Books. New York, NY.