
Independent School Leadership Consortium: A 2025 Report

Independent schools develop the character and skills of the next generation of American leaders. Intentional formation in a thick moral ecology requires adapting formative strategies to late modern culture.

PATRICK BERRY AND RYAN S. OLSON

This initial report summarizes the presentations and discussions of the June 2025 workshop at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. The report also presents the next steps determined by the charter members of the Independent School Leadership Consortium. The meeting fulfilled the Moral Ecology Trust’s objective of convening networks of senior leaders to form good children, wise leaders, and virtuous citizens.

Introduction

This workshop was presented as part of the Moral Ecology Trust, an initiative of the Colloquy on Culture and Formation at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. The Trust seeks to network senior leaders across sectors to improve the health of the ecosystems that form good children, wise leaders, and virtuous citizens. At the April 2024 meeting of the Trust Advisors, Peter Becker, the head of school at the Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut, intrigued several advisors with his presentation about the challenges and opportunities of forming the next generation of leaders in independent schools, a “unique place to understand what moral character formation looks like amidst vibrant pluralism in a totalizing environment” (Becker 2024).

Following the advisors’ lead, this workshop was organized with support from the Kern Family Foundation.

Independent schools make up only a fraction of nonpublic K–12 schools in the United States: Of the 30,492 nonpublic K–12 schools in 2019–2020, approximately 1,600 are members of the National Association of Independent Schools. Nevertheless, because of their elite status, independent schools make up a disproportionately influential subset of American education. Moreover, the tightly knit nature of the independent school community amplifies the potential impact of initiatives like this as ideas and practices often diffuse rapidly across institutions. For these reasons, independent schools are frequently at the forefront of educational innovation and represent ideal contexts for advancing character formation.



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This consortium is one part of a larger effort to cultivate a nascent but loose network of like-minded scholars and practitioners around fundamental questions of meaning and moral order” (Rahn 2024, 115).

The charter group of consortium members consisted of a wide cross-section of independent school leaders. In attendance were:

- Representatives from two Catholic girls’ schools, one in the Northeast (250 students) and the other in the mid-Atlantic (300 students). Heads of school were present from both institutions, as well as a senior administrator and a teacher.
- A senior administrator from an elite boys’ school in a Northeast city (400 students).
- The head of school from a Southeastern coed boarding school (300 students).
- A senior administrator from a Southeastern pre-K–6 day school (500 students).
- Heads of school from three Northeastern independent schools (two boarding, one day, 300–600 students each).

The Context of American Society

Schools in the United States exist within a cultural milieu that does not provide favorable conditions for the flourishing of students, much less the development of their character. These pernicious cultural forces are often invisible to us, though they are

powerful. Without understanding the normative assumptions underlying education, we will be framing the project of education in terms we have not knowingly accepted. In doing so, we will run the risk of passing on hurtful ways of engaging life to our students. This workshop attempted to begin unmasking the normative assumptions underwriting independent school education in the United States and to begin to conceive of schools capable of creating conditions for the true flourishing of students, especially for the formation of good character. To do this, it was necessary to understand the structure of culture, the dominant cultural logics of the day, and the mechanisms whereby schools can create healthy cultures of flourishing.

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These topics were presented by James Davison Hunter, the executive director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and the LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia.

The Necessity of Culture

In contrast to many animal species, human beings are “unfinished at birth.” Humans lack the instincts that provide them with a normative (i.e., “one ought to”) set of

instructions to allow for survival and flourishing. Instincts pre-bake meaningfulness into the objects of the external world. For example, the image of an injured gazelle presents itself to a hungry lion not merely as a slow-moving collection of color but as “something to be eaten.” The world is made meaningful by instinct.

Human beings do not possess instincts capable of providing a meaningful map of the world. Thus, there is a need to create a symbolic representation of the world that builds in normative conditions. Somehow, the world must be made meaningful. Lacking instincts, humanity has responded by fashioning a collective interpretation of the world that overlays meaning onto raw sense data and provides a normative framework to dictate individual and collective action. We call this *culture*.

The Nature of Culture

Culture can be separated into two analytically distinguishable categories: surface and depth (Hunter 2024, 9–10).

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The surface of culture is what people typically think of when they think of culture. It includes things like trends, ideas, values, art, and cultural practices. It is what we necessarily interact with on a daily basis and is the level of culture at which we have agency. It includes modes of symbolic expression that are observable and accessible and are more or less manipulable. Distinctively, we are

conscious of and intentional about the things that populate the surface level of culture.

The deep structures of culture, on the other hand, are the conditions that make the surface level of culture possible. These are the inherited (and often implicit) beliefs that set the parameters for the possibilities of the surface culture. Culture, in this sense, underwrites the apparent order of things, and it typically manifests itself as the unspoken rules, schemes, and resources that organize the overall forms of linguistic and cultural expression and practice. It provides the background against which reality can be interpreted. Importantly, the deep structures of culture are not typically available as objects of intentional thought or action and are the more powerful for being hidden. The power of culture is the degree to which it is taken for granted.

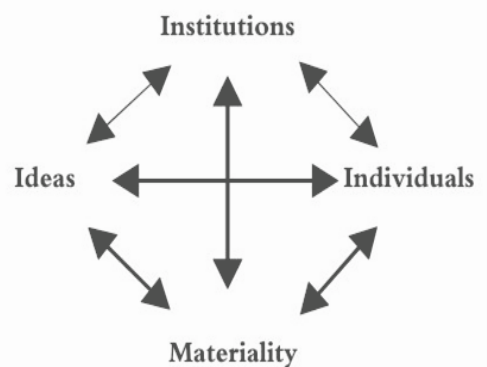
Taken together, the deep structures of culture provide a meaningful picture of reality. This picture is structured by five questions:

1. *Metaphysics*: What is the nature of reality?
2. *Epistemology*: How do we know reality?
3. *Anthropology*: What is the nature of humanity?
4. *Ethics*: How do we treat others?
5. *Teleology*: To what end? What is the goal of humanity and society?

Although members of a culture may not be aware of it, answers to these questions underwrite all attempts at meaning-making; they are “latent in public life” (Hunter 2024, 10, 304–25).

The Origins of Culture

Culture emerges from the dynamic interplay among institutions, individuals, ideas, and material conditions. The confluence of these elements collectively shapes the contours of any given culture. Importantly, each of these components exerts causal influence upon the others in a mutually reinforcing manner, as illustrated in the figure below (Hunter 2010, 32–47; 2024, 7–10).



Institutions may be understood as enduring patterns of thought, behavior, and practice within distinct spheres of social life. Examples include the family, the market, and, most notably, language. In language, the deep structures of culture bring themselves to bear most immediately on the meaning-making project of humanity. Language is a system of names that express concrete realities in symbolic form. These shared symbols are a medium to express and exchange meaningful thought and intention.

Language plays a constitutive role in shaping perceptual and ontological realities. By assigning names, language discretely delineates the world, imposing boundaries upon an otherwise fluid continuum of experience. These conceptual demarcations

are not naturally inscribed in the world; rather, they emerge from a negotiation between linguistic structures, culturally salient ideas, material reality, and individuals. Through such mediation, the undivided flow of the conceptual and material world is parsed into discrete, intelligible entities. Consequently, what appears self-evident or natural is often the product of historically and culturally situated linguistic practices. It is thus impossible to completely throw off the influence of culture because culture provides the conceptual categories that make thought possible.

Cultural Logics

From the confluence of institutions, individuals, ideas, and materiality, cultural logics emerge that reflect the underlying deep structures of culture (Hunter 2024, 11–12).

A cultural logic is a kind of reasoning. Its standard is rarely internal consistency, cohesiveness, or validity based on empirical evidence. Rather, it derives its force from the background of what is assumed (i.e., the deep structures of culture). It is a form, in other words, of meaning-making rooted in premises that cannot themselves be authenticated or validated. But, to those who operate within them, they make sense of the world and the range of actions that follow from them. They are logics of necessity—they present us with worn channels of thinking and action which make it seem as though there are few or no alternatives to them. Indeed, they are defined as much by the options that are unthinkable as the ones they seem to require.

The Culture We Inhabit: Late Modernity and Nihilism

We inhabit the era of late modernity—a period that follows and reframes the intellectual, cultural, and institutional transformations initiated during the Enlightenment and the scientific and industrial revolutions of the 18th century. Modernity itself is characterized by three central features: functional rationality, cultural pluralism, and structural pluralism. In these respects, modernity represents a departure from the predominantly Christian and premodern worldview that preceded it.

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Functional rationality refers to the instrumental application of reason toward efficient outcomes, cultural pluralism denotes the coexistence of diverse belief systems within a shared social space, and structural pluralism reflects the differentiation of institutions (such as religion, science, economy, and politics) into autonomous spheres of influence. Together, these developments signal a profound reconfiguration of social and intellectual life.

Yet the Enlightenment's revolution in thought was neither wholly original nor entirely complete. Although it claimed to inaugurate a radically new epistemological and moral order, it remained deeply indebted to the conceptual grammar of the Jewish and Christian traditions. The idea of truth, once grounded in divine revelation, was retained

but recast in scientific terms. Similarly, the theological virtue of love was secularized into the modern ideal of tolerance.

This hybrid-Enlightenment consensus is now fading, and we find ourselves not in modernity but in late modernity. In its place, a new cultural consensus is emerging. It is the culture of nihilism (Hunter 2024, 326–42).

This new culture of nihilism is evident in the deterioration of a shared moral language, the erosion of epistemic coherence, and the pervasive sense of existential despair. Epistemological failure is the recognition that there are now no objective, knowable truths. All claims to authoritative knowledge are without foundation. Reason, as an autonomous capacity independent of presuppositions or free of any vested interests, is believed to be a fiction.

Ethical incoherence refers to the condition in which moral interpretation has lost its grounding and no universally binding moral values are recognized. In such a context, notions of right and wrong and good and evil are not seen as objective realities but as fluid social constructs, contingent upon historical, cultural, or personal circumstances. Moral language persists, but it lacks coherence, authority, and shared meaning.

Finally, existential despair is the pervasive sense that life lacks intrinsic meaning or ultimate purpose, whether at the individual or societal level. Within this framework, the world is perceived as devoid of significance, rendering human action and suffering futile. In such a context, both personal striving and collective endeavor are stripped of enduring value, leading to a deep-seated sense of alienation and purposelessness.

Paradoxically, we inhabit a world shaped by nihilism without nihilists. Few individuals consciously or explicitly identify as nihilists, a fact that is perhaps unsurprising, given that nihilism operates beneath the surface, hidden in the deep structures of culture. Yet despite its invisibility, the cultural logics of nihilism, marked by moral relativism, epistemic fragmentation, and instrumental reason, have become pervasive, shaping the contours of our collective life and eroding the foundations of shared meaning.

Character

When culture is understood as a *moral order*, its influence on the formation of a person's moral life is inescapably clear. Because schools are formative institutions, a key feature of flourishing school cultures is their ability not only to foster strong academic skills and knowledge but also to *form good character*.

Briefly put, character is the embodiment of a set of moral commitments within a person's life. These moral ideals, as they become more deeply integrated into a person's character, will take shape not only in a person's commitments of belief but also in their habits and in their emotional, moral, and intellectual dispositions. Over time, these dispositions become stable reflections of moral ideals, and the individual grows increasingly adept at not only reconciling but seeing as inseparable the demands of moral ideals and the practical realities of life. Indeed, as character matures, the individual develops a kind of moral perceptiveness whereby they naturally "see what is required by the situation—see what matters—and this perception is itself shaped by their moral training" (McDowell 1998,

149). The world begins to present itself as laden with moral considerations.

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These considerations offer opportunities to exercise four distinctive types of virtue: *moral virtues* like honesty and courage, *civic virtues* like citizenship, *intellectual virtues* like curiosity, and *performance virtues* like courage and perseverance (The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools, Third Edition" 2024). Discerning when to exercise these virtues, especially when situations seem to call for conflicting virtues (e.g., honesty and loyalty) requires a governing virtue: *phronesis* or practical wisdom (Brewer 2011, esp. 102).

Thinking of character in terms of form and substance is illuminating. Formally, character is composed of *moral discipline*, *moral attachment*, and *moral autonomy*. These are, respectively, "the capacities of an individual to inhibit his or her personal appetites or interests on behalf of a greater good, to affirm and live by the ideals of a greater good, and to freely make ethical decisions for or against those goods" (Hunter and Olson 2018, 9). These capacities are requisite for any set of moral ideals to be meaningfully realized in a person's life. Concisely, *discipline* is the "no," *attachment* is the "yes," and *autonomy* is the "here I am!"

Substantively, "character is constituted by the enactments of the moral ideals espoused

within a tradition and enacted within the institutions of particular communities. This is so whether that tradition is formally articulated or even acknowledged. These virtues are, more often than not, valorized in a society's social institutions and celebrated in those exemplars who practice them well" (Hunter and Olson 2018, 10).

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This account of character rests on the conviction that all institutions are inherently normative: They are tacitly grounded in, and oriented toward, ideals, obligations, beliefs, and visions of the good and the right. These normative frameworks are sustained and reinforced by well-established social practices. Accordingly, character formation is a "dialogue": It emerges through the ongoing interaction between the individual and the various pictures of the good that confront them through a converging network of institutions.

The institutions, social structures, habits, and aspirational ideals of a culture together constitute a moral world in which individuals come to learn what an upright life entails and how to navigate that world admirably. As such, the formation of character "involves the interplay of psychological, sociological, cultural, and historical dynamics" (Hunter and Olson 2018, 10).

This interplay finds its most potent expression in the cultivation of *thick moral ecologies*. A moral ecology refers to a dense and interwoven network of mentors, institutions, relationships, beliefs, and narratives that together provide the

formative context for character formation. At their most effective, such ecosystems are coherent and relationally rich, uniting individuals and communities around deeply embedded moral norms and shared expectations. When parents, educators, and coaches are in intentional alignment, exercising a kind of caring watchfulness, they help create the conditions necessary for both individual and communal flourishing. Within such environments, students are invited into small-scale social imaginaries: cultural microcosms that not only articulate but also model forms of life conducive to genuine human flourishing.

A moral ecology is "thick" when these convergent institutions and relationships coalesce around a coherent moral perspective, which is in turn deeply embedded in those relationships and institutions. As opposed to "thin" moral ecologies, "thick" moral ecologies have the resources to offer a fully incarnate moral worldview, where aspirational moral ideals take on particular, material reality in the relationships, institutions, and culture of that ecology. Whereas a thin moral ecology might affirm principles such as "justice" in the abstract, a thick moral ecology will present a robust and explicitly articulated vision of justice, modeled in stories of moral exemplars, embedded in traditions, and reinforced by moral practices.

These thick moral ecologies are sustained by narratives and traditions—stories, symbols, and communal histories that provide clear moral meaning. Together, these elements create the conditions in which moral values are not only taught but lived, allowing individuals to internalize and embody them in

enduring ways. Simply put, “personal integrity needs social integrity” (Davis 2024, 96).

Oriented toward Human Flourishing

The flourishing of students is the ultimate aim of formation. The consortium discussed a fully orb picture of flourishing as involving six “endowments”: goodness, truth, beauty, prosperity, justice, and sustainability (Yates and Hunter 2011). At a personal level, flourishing can be conceived of as involving five domains: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships (VanderWeele 2017).

The consortium members discussed concepts involved in forming character and the virtues for flourishing (Arthur 2024): *moral sources, culture, anthropology, agency, motivation, performance, context, love, and pedagogy*. Each of these concepts can be implemented on a thick–thin continuum to fit a wide range of school cultures, educational philosophies, and types of governance (Olson forthcoming).

Lessons from the Classical Tradition

With this cultural and historical background in view, UVA sociologist Angel Adams Parham, cochair of the Colloquy on Culture and Formation at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, presented on the topics of formation and moral imagination.

Drawing from her long experience in classical education, Parham suggested that independent school educators ought to conceive of education as formation, not as training. The education-as-training paradigm

conceives of education as a transaction between student and teacher, where students consume content provided by teachers. The mechanism of reproducing knowledge in this paradigm is scaling. Scaling is the logic of manufacturing replicable copies: Educators create routines and procedures and put students through them to get the desired output. It is market-oriented in its logic, valuing efficiency, replication, and predictability, and ignores the reality of human good, reducing education to a technical exercise rather than a formation of persons.

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In contrast, education-as-formation begins with an invitation to the life of a learning community. It aims not only at knowledge but at the cultivation of curiosity, thoughtfulness, and virtue. This paradigm acknowledges that human nature, while flexible, is ultimately ordered toward a particular human good, which is expressed in the tradition a student inhabits and must be accounted for in education. The method of replication in this paradigm is multiplication, the relevant metaphor for which is birth. It is focused on conjoining the good with the particularities of a student in a way that brings forth a new expression of the good in that student’s life.

Building on this understanding of formation, Parham emphasized a central goal of

education: the development of a student's moral imagination. Developing one's moral imagination is the process of making pictures of the good life and coming to resemble those images. This development must take place within the framework of education-as-formation because it is the process of the good taking form in the particularities of an individual student and the tradition they inhabit—constraining realities that are ignored in the education-as-training paradigm.

We cannot permit our schools to passively absorb and transmit the dominant culture of nihilism, for to do so would be to acculturate students into a mode of existence necessarily at odds with the possibility of human flourishing.

To make the framework concrete, Parham introduced the practice of creating commonplace books. In this practice, students and teachers copy key passages from texts verbatim. By borrowing from many sources, students integrate the insights of important thinkers in a combination that is borne of a long moral tradition and is yet a novel synthesis of that moral tradition in the life of the student. Through this slow, deliberate work, students begin to internalize the language and patterns of thought that shape a virtuous life.

Moral Ecology Projects

The consortium members participated in a “Moral Ecology Protocol” in which each member selected an area of school life (such as curriculum, athletics, student life, or discipline) and analyzed whether that domain currently operated under inadequate implicit normative assumptions. Participants then developed plans to anchor those areas to concepts more conducive to flourishing. Participants spent time reflecting and planning and then met in small groups to receive feedback. These ideas became projects to pursue in the next academic year.

Examples of these projects included a reimagining of a disciplinary system: Rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all demerit model, one school proposed a system in which consequences would more proportionately reflect the nature of the offense and would involve discussions with a mentor, thereby cultivating a more substantive and intuitive sense of the good and right among students.

Another project focused on student life, emphasizing that if character formation is to be central to a school's mission, then the environments where students live, socialize, and spend the majority of their time must be morally intentional spaces.

A third school has grounded its character formation efforts in the biography and moral example of its founder. While this founder may not be an ultimate moral authority, the use of him as a moral exemplar may provide a shared moral language that is at once thick and particular and yet provides an accessible point of moral identification for students and staff.

Another project tackled a school's widespread but nonmalicious behavioral issues not as a matter of student apathy or attention-seeking but as the result of an emergent subculture in which informal peer norms and exemplars were subtly shaping students' moral imaginations.

Finally, one school incorporated a formal character formation creed into its mission statement and used this framework to guide strategic planning with its board. This signaled a broader institutional commitment to embedding moral formation into the life of the school as a foundational element of its educational vision.

Together, these projects to establish moral ecologies capable of sustaining character formation within independent schools represent a promising step in the broader project of counterformation: the intentional cultivation of moral and civic virtue in contrast to prevailing cultural currents. The continued success of these efforts will require learning from these initial projects, as well as continued dialogue among independent school leaders. Importantly, teachers, other administrators, and board members need to be supplied with the conceptual resources to think about education in terms of character and flourishing.

The Way Forward

As discussed above, culture is fundamentally the human attempt to make meaning of the world, overcoming our lack of instinct by constructing frameworks capable of producing individual and collective flourishing. Nihilistic culture, by contrast, is

structurally incapable of sustaining such flourishing. Its underlying logic undermines the very possibility of meaningful moral or epistemic consensus, eroding the cultural conditions necessary for a thriving human society.

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Thus, we cannot permit our schools to passively absorb and transmit the underlying assumptions of the dominant culture of nihilism, for to do so would be to acculturate students into a mode of existence necessarily at odds with the possibility of human flourishing. It will require active steps to avoid this outcome.

First, we must recognize and bring into the foreground the background assumptions that have steered the dominant culture into ethical confusion and epistemic despair. If cultural power is the degree to which cultural assumptions are taken for granted, then by bringing these assumptions into the visible forum of debate, we fundamentally alter the kind of relationship we and our students have to it. No longer are the assumptions to be taken for granted, and their power is diminished.

Second, it is necessary for independent school leaders to remain in conversation with

one another as they seek to unmask the pathological cultural forces at work in their schools and build healthy cultures of flourishing. To this end, the ISLC will continue to provide a forum for independent school leaders to come together and chart the path forward for the creation of healthier schools to serve students' flourishing.

Finally, schools must cultivate alternative cultures of flourishing. Recognizing the inadequacy of the background beliefs that constitute the prevailing cultural mythos, independent schools are uniquely positioned to foster countercultural moral communities grounded in assumptions capable of forming good character and fostering flourishing in its fullest sense.

Specifically, the Independent School Leadership Consortium's charter members made the following decisions:

1. Meet in Charlottesville for three days in June 2026 as the first cohort.
2. The first cohort will invite several heads from other independent schools to form the second cohort. The two cohorts will meet together and separately for presentations and discussion (day 1), case discussions (day 2), and character/moral ecology practica (day 3).
3. Develop a concise description of the Charlottesville experience so independent school colleagues can anticipate its potential impact for their schools and teams.
4. Prepare a glossary of key terms from the Charlottesville discussions to reference for leadership purposes.

5. Develop a slide deck and school community survey to communicate and evaluate the nine components based on the thick-thin scale.
6. Create an experience for leadership teams and teachers to deepen their understanding of late modernity and develop practical strategies to adapt formational activities.
7. Launch a newsletter that can sustain and share the ISLC's energy and ideas with the independent school sector.



Patrick Berry is a research associate in the Colloquy on Culture and Formation at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He recently earned an MA in philosophy at the University of Virginia.

Ryan S. Olson is a research professor at the University of Virginia and cochair of the Colloquy on Culture and Formation at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.

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