

The Ohio Center for Civic Character Project

An Innovative Citizen-Empowerment Initiative of the Ohio Secretary of State

Program Summary:

The Ohio Center for Civic Character (OCCC) is a unique citizen engagement and empowerment project that advances a fresh approach to discouraging youth and adult cynicism and civic disengagement. The center has identified three critical civic literacy “knowledge gaps” and addresses these in three clear guides: “The Leader’s Guide to Building CHARACTER,” “The Leader’s Guide to Building COLLABORATION,” and “The Leader’s Guide to Building COMMUNITY.” The guides leverage America’s heritage documents and a new document: *UncommonSense*SM.”

Program Description:

The Challenge

Ohio’s chief citizen-builder, the Secretary of State, inspired by the 1999 New Millennium Project report by the National Association of Secretaries of State, determined cynicism to be the *key* factor in explaining “endemic citizen distrust and disengagement,” which is putting the essential framework of American self-governance at risk among the next generation.

A work group assembled by the secretary in Ohio further determined that the single greatest contributor to youth *and adult* cynicism was *not* a perceived lack of competency, but rather chronic “low character,” manifested first among institutional (government, faith, business and academic) *leaders* and, secondarily, among *adults* in general.

Additionally, it was also found that while *competency*-building training resources abounded for leaders, few, if any, corresponding and systematic *character*-building resources are contemplated, let alone available for today’s capacity-building leaders. It was also found that breakdowns among collaborating leaders were triggered not by *competency deficiencies*, but by *character breeches*.

It was also determined that while the state encouraged the implementation of systematic character training resources targeting *children* in its public schools, it needed to confront emerging research indicating that targeting children *without correspondingly targeting the adults who influence them* (*parents, principles, pastors, policemen, presidents, etc*) had questionable, if any, effect.

Further, it was found that clear maps and methods to aid adults in acquiring the language (and practices) of example-setting character building were *non-existent*. In 2000, the program goal became “to urgently develop common sense character building for Ohio’s adults to benefit the next generation.” This goal squarely addressed the premise that “good character is the cornerstone of good citizenship.”

Finally, early discussions revealed that all institutions serving Ohioans (government, faith, academic and business) would need to *co-own the advocacy challenge simultaneously* to overcome resistance of wrongly feeling the problem was associated with a single institution. The program would also need to identify an actual character-ethics code that was adequately proven. Additionally the program would need a clear outcome goal that would insure sustainability to impact healthy civic literacy in the coming generation.

Innovative Remedy

The resulting strategy was first to adopt the non-partisan, non-profit American Center for Civic Character's unique 20-point "character-builder's framework" called "UncommonSense."

The framework was then "personalized" by many business, government, higher education and faith "co-advocates" using a customized cover declaration that committed them to striving to "be the message of character as they brought the message to their constituents." The co-advocates (statewide trade and professional associations) implement OCCC-created character-building workshops for their members as part of their continuous leadership education and development programs at their cost.

To date, this distributed approach to adult/leadership training appeals to practical interests and has not devolved into a disingenuous and shallow "corrective ethics training" effort that could fuel more cynicism.

The entire and careful positioning of this re-educational enterprise relies more on "inspirational" incentive, rather than "motivational" incentive. The project credo has become: "In Ohio, we need to jointly build leadership character, not because anyone is at fault, but because we are all at fault; not because it works, but because it is right, and not for our benefit alone, but for those who follow."

Finally, the project addresses the "aftercare" of adult learners and points them toward productive implementation outlets to practically reveal and encourage the cultivation of personal character *and provide a tangible result*. Therefore, the secretary established the Ohio Center for Civic Character as the *catalytic* project to bring about a chain of events that encourages leadership character building *to mature into collaboration building that fuels a fresh focus on community-building*.

The Center has fashioned three tutorial guides which specifically redress the knowledge gaps found in our current cultural: Build CHARACTER, Build COLLABORATION, Build COMMUNITY. Over five years of research, field testing and application the Build CHARACTER tutorial has clearly created an appealing entry point or "ground floor" of this civic literacy project and is very appealing to multiple sectors. The COLLABORATION and COMMUNITY guides while available to leaders in all sectors are most operational to specific civic influencers such as candidates, office holders and faith leaders.

The center's mission is as follows:

"The Ohio Center for Civic Character is a collaborative statewide civic education capacity-building project, providing innovative adult learning resources for local government, faith, education and business leaders, which 1) builds leadership character, 2) unites leaders in a collaborative culture, and 3) equips leaders to effectively enrich their communities...together."

Character + Collaboration=Community

Project Outcomes to Date:

Ohio Secretary of State's Office:

The project's credibility relies upon the example-setting efforts of its network of co-advocates. As a leading co-advocate, Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell has patiently and successfully established a "character-building culture" among the 145 union and non-union staff since 2000. *This has resulted in a documented culture transformation that serves as an inspiration and best-practice guide to others.* (Contact Monty Lobb, Assistant Secretary of State, 614-466-3217)

Our co-advocate network has worked collaboratively to distribute more than 100,000 copies of *UncommonSense* and 10,000 copies of "A Guide to Building High Character Leaders and Organizations" via 75 workshops and conference events in the past five years.

Ohio Higher Education Sector:

In 2001, 15 Ohio universities incorporated *UncommonSense* as a key discussion-starting tool for character ethics to educate faculty and student populations. Under the leadership of the *OSCCC Project*, these universities formed the *Ohio Collegiate Alliance for Character* which includes a project-tracking web site hosted by the Office of the Secretary of State. In 2002-2004 *OCAC* hosted 38 universities who connected with the alliance at its annual collegiate character-building summits.

Several universities including, Cedarville, the DeVry Institute and Mount Vernon Nazarene University invited the center to provide intensive tutorials to faculty and administration team members. *In 2006 the Templeton Foundation invited the project to submit a multi-year grant to bring 25 of these Ohio universities together in a nationally unique collaborative Collegiate Character-Building Project.*

Ohio Local and State Government Sector:

In 2001, the 124th Ohio General Assembly declared Ohio to be a "Character-Building State" and pledged its members to audit all successive bills against the standard of "how the bill would build character." The Ohio Municipal League, Ohio Mayors Association, and the Ohio County Commissioners Association, among others have provided *UncommonSense* workshops to more than 1200 mayors, commissioners, clerks, city council members, and city administrators. In 2005 the *Ohio Municipal League* officially adopted the *UncommonSense Leadership Character Ethics 4-hour seminar* as an on-going component of their professional credentialing institute.

In 2003 the Center extended its message of character-rich leading into state agency administrations by providing on-going training to deputy wardens and wardens of the Ohio Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The Leadership Character Ethics workshop series is now an annual component of the department's leadership institute. Other agencies including the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources have requested and received upper management Leadership Character Ethics tutorials as well.

Ohio Business Sector:

In 2002, the 6,000-member Central Ohio Better Business Bureau (BBB), an organization whose mission is: "To foster free enterprise and business self-regulation through consumer education and business ethics advocacy" led the way in adopting *UncommonSense* for its board, staff and members. It now offers the center's annual Leadership Character Ethics workshop series which follows its annual "Integrity Awards" event that draws 500-700 business leaders. In 2004 it added an "UncommonStudents" character scholarship project that provides ten \$1000 character scholarships to college-bound Central Ohio area high school seniors. These scholarships, totaling \$10,000 annually, are funded entirely by corporate contributions. This student outreach results in 60 high school counselors being systematically oriented to the message of the Ohio Center for Civic Character annually.

In 2004 the 5,000 member Cleveland BBB extended the Ohio Center's business leader outreach and adopted the "Columbus BBB" model for its board, staff, members and area high schools. In 2006 the Dayton and Toledo BBB leaders (representing an additional 10,000 business owners) are reviewing the project model for possible adoption. Moreover, the national council for BBB US chapters will be contemplating showcasing the Ohio program as a national best practice for

its 95 Chapter CEO's in its 2006-2007 national conferences. *It's important to note that this unique business outreach requires BBB CEO's to become project "co-advocates" which involves a rigorous one year internal campaign to develop Board, CEO and staff commitment to Leadership Character Ethics practices...prior to advancing the same to their membership. This example-setting approach to character-building ethics in business while taking much more time, puts the project in a class of its own in terms of outcomes and sustainability.*

Ohio Candidates of Character:

Starting in 2000, the OCCC initiated the annual "Ohio Candidates of Character" project that engages both Ohio office-seeking candidates and their respective county board of election officers. This adult leadership tutorial program includes providing a materials kit that outfits the candidate to become an articulate co-advocate of leadership character ethics in their community while campaigning. The kit *includes a formal public commitment declaration to self-govern under the UncommonSense framework if elected.* The project's goal is to equip these "leading citizens" with a powerful vocabulary and a call to "**be** the civic character" message as they "**share** the civic character message". To date the project has resulted in 1,750 public commitments from all party affiliations and requests for more resources to support the launching of "communities of character."

Ohio Faith Sector:

In 2001, a focus group of reformed and orthodox Jewish rabbis, Roman Catholic priests, mainline protestant ministers, conservative evangelical and charismatic pastors, Mormon clergy, Hindu clerics and Muslim lay leaders gave *UncommonSense* an unqualified endorsement as a character-building resource. This was not unanticipated as the *UncommonSense* framework is based on a "universal" language of common conscience and not on a "religious language". As a result it has a proven and strong cross-appeal to diverse audiences.

In light of this the Center for Civic Character's companion tutorials "Build COLLABORATION" and "Build COMMUNITY" have also been received well by this important group. In late 2005 15,000 Ohio ministerial license holders were provided briefing correspondence relating to their adoption and use of all these resources within their communities. Follow up and aftercare assistance will be provided throughout 2006. An additional civic education strategy to serve this sector is being explored through discussions with the emerging Ohio Governor's Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The goal is to find fresh ways to equip social service intervention and prevention service providers with the center's *adult character-building tools to benefit both providers and the actual social service recipient population.*

Ohio Urban Community Sector:

To address the unique concerns for those civic leaders attempting to live out high character among Ohioans populating dense and often asset-depleted communities the center created an Urban Learning Laboratory Project that connects neighborhood restoration leaders and youth workers with one another and the center's materials for field testing. The project includes special tutorials that test and apply character-based race relations best practices as a strong component that lays the groundwork for the Build COLLABORATION and Build COMMUNITY tutorials. An advocacy strategy for deeper deployment among urban civic leaders statewide is being formulated.

Young Citizen Sector:

Since 2001 the center has participated in the annual Governor's Summit on Character Education and has provided workshops for primary and secondary faculty and administrators focusing on adult character building techniques to enhance faculty climate and parent-faculty relationships. In 2005 the center provided a launching outreach to over 1000 high school administrations and boards of education. In 2006 the center will publish a "Character-Building Resource Companion" for Ohio Educators. The center is a current member of the Ohio Council for Character Education which is laboring to create state guidelines for minimal character ethic education outcomes for Ohio students. Additionally, the center has helped refine the Secretary of State's "Expect More: Build Character, Volunteer and Vote" high school civic literacy educational outreach to students.

New Citizen Sector:

In 2005 the center assisted the Secretary's office with designing the "Citizenship Matters: Ohio's Guide to New Citizens". This guide supports those who train US immigrants in Ohio to become the newest citizens. One unique feature of the guide is that it introduces UncommonSense as the uniting framework that bonds all diverse Americans together. The Guide demystifies the term "Good Moral Character" which looms in the current Federal immigration guidelines as a grossly undefined but required standard for citizenship. Other unique guide benefits include a section entitled the "Ten Convictions of Empowered Citizens" and the "Uniqueness of America" both of which establish an accurate view of civil society. The center's work has included responding to multiple invitations from the US State Department to brief visiting foreign delegations studying best practices in nation-building and preventative anti-corruption methods.