

Pillars of the Mind and Heart: Strengthening Character Formation Across the Student Experience

by Eddy M. Rojas
Executive Vice President and Provost

Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good.

— Catechism of the Catholic Church¹

Every university shapes its students, but the true test of excellence lies in *how* a school shapes its students and *toward what purpose*. At the University of St. Thomas, character formation is not an afterthought or add-on; it is the heartbeat of our Catholic mission and our educational vision. From the beginning, we have aspired to form graduates who are not only deeply knowledgeable but also courageously ethical—morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely, and work skillfully to advance the common good.

Toward this goal, *The Four Pillars Project* will build upon the University's rich foundation of mission and culture by deepening and integrating character education through the lens of the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. By using a rotating "virtue of the year" carousel model and by intentionally integrating the virtues across curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular spaces, this initiative will strengthen a culture where students gain the knowledge, skills, and inner moral compass they need to lead with integrity, resilience, and purpose. Here, I introduce the vision of this new initiative and outline how it will elevate the education and formation of virtuous leaders who uphold the best of the St. Thomas experience.

Cardinal Virtues & Character Formation

To advance our community's academic excellence, my charge as provost is to cultivate the conditions that allow faculty, staff, and students to richly encounter the breadth and depth of the Catholic intellectual tradition and our faith's social teaching. Character formation is fundamental to the pursuit of such intellectual and moral excellence, as it represents the process of cultivating the moral and ethical habits that define a person's integrity, choices, and relationships.

Beneficially, the namesake of our University, St. Thomas Aquinas, provided an outstanding roadmap toward character formation when he bridged ancient Greek, Roman, and Christian traditions to articulate a vision of the moral life around the four cardinal virtues. These four virtues are called "cardinal" (from the Latin *cardo*, meaning "hinge") because they foster good habits within our key faculties—prudence with the intellect, justice with the will, and courage and temperance with our passions. In this project, we will not merely repeat what St. Thomas said but draw from him and build upon this powerful tradition to nurture what brings out the excellence within each of us.

While providing a comprehensive picture of the virtues is beyond the scope of this paper, Figure 1 illustrates how cultivating the cardinal virtues aligns with the broader mission of Catholic higher education. At the heart of this mission lies the Catholic intellectual tradition and social teaching, which together provide the theological, philosophical, and ethical foundation for our educational endeavors. These traditions illuminate and animate three mutually reinforcing goals of Catholic higher education: the pursuit of critical thinking, the cultivation of domain knowledge, and the intentional formation of character. Importantly, this character formation piece encompasses far more than moral instruction alone and involves nurturing an individual's habits, dispositions, and virtues, in keeping with their God-given individuality. Such work is an essential dimension of Catholic education, and we must undertake this task.

Leaning upon the four cardinal virtues as our foundation for character formation will support us in this effort. In the Catholic tradition, the cardinal virtues represent the best of natural moral wisdom and provide us with an explanatory language for what the human person and community look like when they are at their best. While not the entirety of character formation, these virtues provide a time-tested moral framework that guides human flourishing and supports the development of wisdom in action. In this

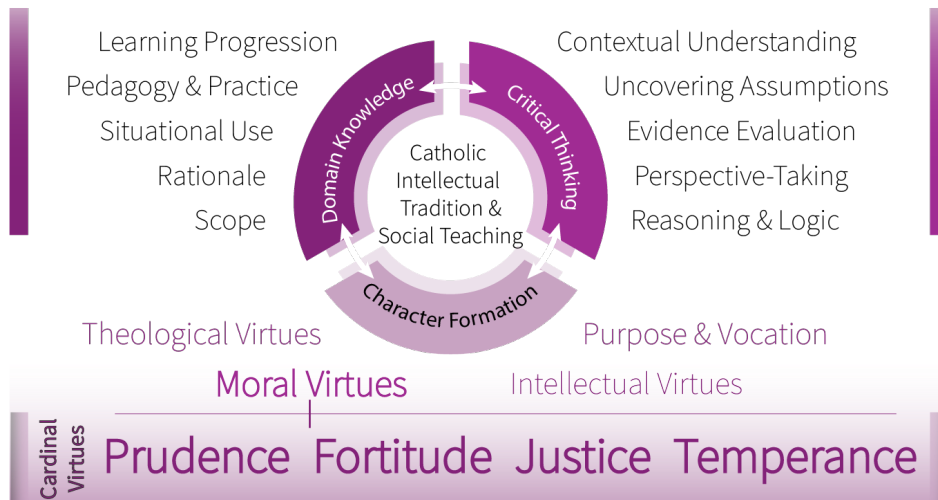


Figure 1: The cardinal virtues in the context of our mission in Catholic higher education. Importantly, the cardinal virtues help individuals derive the broader moral virtues, which combine with theological virtues, intellectual virtues, and each individual's purpose to form character. With *The Four Pillars Project*, we reinforce this character formation task as a critical part of our mission.

way, the cardinal virtues function as a vital part of a larger *ecosystem of formation* that integrates broader moral virtues, theological virtues, intellectual virtues, and purpose discernment. As depicted in Figure 1, when combined with critical thinking and domain knowledge, these virtues enliven the entirety of Catholic education and serve not only personal growth but also the common good.

Similarly, while this initiative is grounded in the Catholic *virtue* tradition—which shapes our initiative's primary framework, vocabulary, and vision—insights from other traditions can extend our shared understandings of character formation and the common good. For example, Confucianism guides a virtue-informed philosophy that fosters moral character and social harmony by upholding self-cultivation, relational harmony, and responsibility to society. Hinduism offers rich teachings on ethical life in its ritual practices and its breadth of religious texts, including the ancient scriptures known as the *Vedas*, the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the ritualistic and narrative texts known as the *Puranas*. Buddhism defines a path for overcoming suffering and attaining liberation through ethical living and mental discipline. Judaism emphasizes the cultivation of virtues through Torah study, ethical commandments (*mitzvot*), and moral responsibility before God and community. Islam also affirms the goodness of a moral life rooted in obedience to God, with emphasis on intention (*niyyah*) and just action. These different traditions suggest a shared human intuition: that good character

benefits from a habitual pursuit of the good, and that such personal formation is essential to flourishing individuals and just societies.

Now is the right moment to affirm this pursuit of the broader good, since the cardinal virtues remain profoundly relevant and necessary in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI) and a larger technocratic paradigm. As AI systems grow in power, complexity, and ubiquity, ancient and perennial virtues can serve as moral and philosophical anchors for individual behavior and collective decision-making. These virtues also counter an increasingly individualistic culture that elevates political and ideological divisions and weakens communal and institutional life. Thus, by strengthening our students' footings in the cardinal virtues now, we will empower our students to live meaningful, ethical, and purpose-driven lives as they weather any future storms.

Crystalizing Synergies

The Four Pillars Project is not a standalone effort—it is a bold step toward weaving together the many character-focused threads already present across the University. From academic programs and co-curricular experiences to mission-driven centers and university-wide strategic priorities, our community has long demonstrated a deep commitment to virtue, leadership, and the common good. This initiative builds upon that strong foundation by crystallizing synergies, strengthening alignment among existing efforts, and making the formation of character an

explicit, animating thread throughout the student experience. It seeks not to duplicate or replace what is already underway, but to amplify and connect it—reinforcing shared values, developing a common vocabulary, deepening collective impact, and enhancing the visibility of character development as central to our Catholic mission.

From Aspiration to Action

Project Goals

The Four Pillars Project advances four goals:

1. **Foster character development in students** by integrating the pursuit of the cardinal virtues into academic, co-curricular, and extracurricular experiences across the University.
2. **Form and encourage faculty and staff** with evidence-based strategies, knowledge, resources, and tools to support student character development within each respective discipline.
3. **Strengthen an institution-wide culture** that promotes virtuous living by incorporating the cardinal virtues into academic and non-academic aspects of university life.
4. **Provide thought leadership** among peers in higher education regarding effective strategies to enhance student character development.

Project Activities

Activity A: Equip Faculty and Staff through Professional Development. To foster a campus-wide culture of character formation, *The Four Pillars Project* will offer a robust series of professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. These offerings will range from foundational workshops that introduce core strategies for supporting students' character development to more intensive seminars focused on integrating the cardinal virtues into academic, co-curricular, and extracurricular experiences.

Key initiatives include a summer seminar for collaborative curriculum development, opportunities for peer-to-peer learning through campus presentations, and quarterly trainings that highlight practical tools for applying the virtue of the year across disciplines and roles. Additionally, updated intranet resources will provide ongoing access to sample assignments, activity guides, and research-based

strategies. Through these efforts, faculty and staff will be empowered to become intentional architects of student formation as they shape learning environments that cultivate both intellect and character.

Activity B: Enhance the Curriculum and Student Learning Experiences. To make character formation a lasting and transformative element of the undergraduate experience, this initiative emphasizes framing disciplines using the cardinal virtues. As shown in Figure 2, this integration provides meaningful opportunities for students to explore and apply the virtues within the context of their chosen fields of study. Doing so also allows for intellectual formation to shape character formation, and vice versa.

One of the most distinctive contributions of *The Four Pillars Project* is this intentional embedding of virtue-centered learning within academic courses. The project will begin by identifying existing courses and learning experiences where the cardinal virtues are already being taught, either explicitly or implicitly. Building on this foundation, faculty will be invited to apply for mini grants to develop or enhance course content, assignments, or learning activities to bring the virtues to life in their classrooms.

Activity C: Expand Co-curricular and Extracurricular Opportunities to Support Virtues in Action. To bring character formation to life beyond the classroom, *The Four Pillars Project* will expand the range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities available to students—each intentionally aligned with the respective virtue of the year.

The Division of Student Affairs, in collaboration with campus-wide partners, will offer interactive skill-building workshops. Other programs will include organizing campus-wide events that convene around a common virtue-determined activity, engaging guest speakers that spark dialogue and inspire action, and curating art exhibitions that invite reflection through creative expression. Together, these offerings will foster an environment where students not only learn about virtue—they practice it, experience it, and grow through it.

Activity D: Strengthen Communication and Continuous Improvement. Clear communication and thoughtful evaluation are essential to the success and sustainability of *The Four Pillars Project*. We will design and implement communication strategies that keep faculty, staff, and students informed, engaged,

 PRUDENCE CIVIL ENGINEERING Civil engineers design under uncertainty—soil behavior, environmental forces, future use, and material variability. Prudence is reflected in safety factors that protect public safety and ensure resilience. More than a simple calculation, this process requires sound judgment that anticipates failure, weighs ethical implications, and serves the common good. A prudent engineer asks not just <i>can</i> we build it—but <i>should</i> we build it this way, here, and for this purpose?	 JUSTICE ECONOMICS Economists analyze systems that distribute resources under conditions of inequality and constraint. Justice manifests when questions go beyond efficiency or profit to prioritize fairness. This virtue requires ethical reasoning to consider who benefits, who bears the cost, and how decisions promote the common good across generations. A just economist asks not just <i>what works</i>—but <i>what is right, for whom, and at what cost?</i>	 FORTITUDE EDUCATION Educators teach in environments shaped by diverse needs, limited resources, and shifting societal pressures. Fortitude enables them to persevere, even when the path is difficult—whether defending truth in the curriculum, maintaining high standards with compassion, or affirming the dignity of every student. A courageous educator asks not just <i>how do I teach this lesson</i>—but <i>how do I stand firm for the good of all, even when it's hard?</i>	 TEMPERANCE PSYCHOLOGY Psychologists navigate powerful emotions, ethical boundaries, and complex human behavior. Temperance sustains their ability to balance empathy with objectivity and care with restraint. This virtue requires self-discipline, ethical clarity, and respect for human dignity. A temperate psychologist asks not just <i>how can I help</i>—but <i>what is measured, appropriate, and truly in the person's best interest?</i>
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Figure 2: Examples of how cardinal virtues guide various disciplines. By framing domains using the cardinal virtues, we not only teach *what* these fields do but *how* they make decisions for the common good.

and connected to the initiative's goals and opportunities. This process includes leveraging existing channels and platforms to promote participation and to share updates across campus.

To ensure that the project maintains quality as it adapts to changes in the higher education landscape, we will incorporate a dynamic process of reflection and refinement. Both formal assessments and informal debriefs will evaluate progress, unearth new ideas, and adjust implementation strategies in real time.

Activity E: Share Insights to Advance Character Formation in Higher Education. *The Four Pillars Project* is not only a transformative initiative for the University of St. Thomas—it also offers valuable insights for the broader landscape of higher education. Recognizing the potential to inspire and inform similar efforts, particularly at Catholic colleges and universities, we will share our strategies, outcomes, and lessons learned through conference presentations, scholarly publications, and collaborative networks. By contributing to national conversations on character education and virtue formation, St. Thomas will help shape a wider movement committed to shaping morally responsible leaders. Through this outward-facing engagement, the University affirms its role as both a leader and a

learner—advancing our mission while supporting the common good across the academy.

Project Funding

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An Invitation

I invite each member of our community to join us on this journey. Together, we can ensure that St. Thomas stands at the forefront of character formation and positively impacts our students, our society, and our world. Let's implement *The Four Pillars Project* together and raise up a brighter future.

Endnotes

1. "The virtues and grace," in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), § 1810.