



The
CHARACTER

CONVENING
2026

Conference Program

May 11-13, 2026

Pensacola Beach, Florida



Samford University

Orlean Beeson School of Education

What a joy it is to welcome you to the 7th Annual Character convening!

Over the past six years we have learned new information about character formation, shared innovative ideas and practices, networked with colleagues, and become a family. We, once again, have the opportunity to grow our knowledge and family bonds during the Character convening over the next few days.

In past years, we have learned about theory. This year the convening will focus on what virtues look like in action with this year's theme as ***Character in Action***. Instead of a keynote speaker, various convening attendees will share information about the character domains and provide an opportunity for attendees to put the virtues in those domains in action. Breakout sessions with presentations will be interspersed throughout the convening. Participants will choose from a varied selection of breakout sessions to attend. Most of all, please take advantage of the late afternoons and evenings to connect with others over a meal or at the pool.

Your presence is an indication of your commitment to helping students flourish. Thank you for sharing your time, expertise, and presence at the 7th Annual Character Convening.

Don't forget to tag #CC2026 in all your photos!



Agenda at-a-Glance

Monday, May 11, 2026

5 pm to 6:30 pm Reception

Tuesday, May 12, 2026

7:15-8:15 am	Breakfast	<i>White Sands</i>
8:15-8:30 am	Welcome and Introduction	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
8:30-10:00 am	Domain #1: Intellectual, <i>Dr. Lori Doyle</i>	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
10:00-10:30 am	Mid-morning break	
10:30 am-11:30 am	Breakout Session #1	
11:30am-12:30 pm	Lunch	<i>White Sands</i>
12:45-1:45 pm	Breakout Session #2	
1:50-3:30 pm	Domain #2: Moral, <i>Colin Townsend</i>	<i>Emerald Coast</i>

Wednesday, May 13, 2025

7:15-8:00 am	Breakfast	<i>White Sands</i>
8:00-9:30 am	Domain #3: Civic, <i>Dr. Mary Lombardo-Graves</i>	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
9:30-10:30 am	Breakout Session #3	
10:30-10:45 am	BREAK	
10:45 am-12:15 pm	Domain #4: Performance, <i>Dr. Ben White</i>	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
12:15-12:45 pm	Lunch	<i>White Sands</i>
12:45-1:00 pm	Closing Event	<i>White Sands</i>

Speakers

Domain #1

Dr. Lori Doyle works as Associate Professor of Education and serves as Director of the Master of Arts in Educational Leadership: Social Emotional Learning program at Concordia University Irvine in California. Lori is also the Assistant Director of the Servant Leadership Institute and her roles include framework integration, curriculum updates, and assessment measures. She has worked on extensive curriculum development projects in multiple programs for the university . Lori has taught at several universities over the past 20 years, but her career began in 1999 as a high school English and Theology teacher, curriculum writer, communications director, and basketball coach. Lori has a PhD in Psychology with an emphasis in Cognition.



Domain #2

Colin has served as Principal of the University of Birmingham School since 2018, leading a 1,200-student all-ability secondary school in the UK's second-largest city. With over 30 years in education—including senior leadership roles and work with the Department for Education—he is committed to excellence in teaching, leadership, and character development. A mathematics specialist, Colin studied at Kent, Oxford, and Southampton, and holds advanced qualifications in leadership. He also advises nationally on education policy and collaborates closely with the University of Birmingham to support innovation and school improvement. Colin is presently an education doctoral student at University College London, with an interest in bridging research, policy, and practice to the benefit of sustainable, values-based, School improvement.



Speakers

Domain #3

Dr. Mary Lombardo-Graves is currently serving as part-time faculty for Grand Canyon University, teaching Ethics and Advocacy in Education. Prior to this Mary was an Associate Professor of Education at the university of Evansville, where she coordinated dual licensure special educator programs.

She has worked across various institutions to develop character education and special education curriculum. Her research interests include mentoring, character education, and Equine-Assisted Learning within teacher preparation and community programs. She has worked with the Ministry of Education in Trinidad to provide professional learning workshops on inclusive education for teachers. Over the past year, Mary decided to combine her passions and has developed character education Equine-Assisted Learning programming.



Domain #4

Benjamin White, a resident of Northport, Alabama, is a clinical assistant professor of education leadership at the University of Alabama and a Fellow of the Hope Institute. With over 17 years in public education, he served as an elementary teacher, assistant principal, and principal before joining The University of Alabama educational faculty. At The University of Alabama, he works with the Leadership for Character initiative, serves as Director of the Alabama Superintendent's Academy, and teaches courses in Educational Leadership. Dr. White collaborates with schools nationwide, presents on character education, and supports its implementation across Alabama.



Detailed Agenda

Monday, May 11, 2026

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7:15-8:15 am	Breakfast	<i>White Sands</i>
8:15-8:30 am	Welcome and Introduction	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
8:30-10:00 am	Domain #1: Intellectual	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
10:00-10:30 am	Mid-morning break	
10:30 am-11:30 am	Breakout Session #1	

Aquamarine #1 (Room Host: Monique Gardner Witherspoon)

Teacher Buy In to Character Education in Middle Schools (*Meghan Neil & Ann Pickens*)

Character, Conduct and Connection: What makes a difference and why? (*Colin Townsend & Clara Gerhardt*)

Aquamarine #2 (Room Host: Jane Cobia)

The Power of Place: Studying Character in Geographical Context (*Nancy Winfrey*)

Teaching Character without DEI: Implications for Justice, Equity, and Empathy in Teacher Education (*Amany Selah*)

Coral Reef (Room Host: Reenay Rogers)

Cleared for Takeoff: Character in Action - Leadership Lessons from the Blue Angels (*Denise Knight & Jan Miller*)

A Character Coaching Model for Student Success and Flourishing (*Jeana Partin & Tina Murrow*)

Emerald Coast (Room Host: Melissa Judge)

Formative and Informative - Character (Walks) in Action (*Ben White & Andrew Ketchum*)

KARE-ing About Character: A Design Tool for Cultivating Virtue in Programs and Courses (*Karen Melton*)

Tuesday Continued

11:30am-12:30 pm Lunch

White Sands

12:45-1:45 pm Breakout Session #2

Aquamarine #1 (Room Host: Laura Casey)

Houston we have a problem: Character-Driven Leadership in Turbulent Times (*Bill Cleveland & Clara Gerhardt*)

Building Character through Teaching Teamwork in the College Classroom (*George Daniels*)

Aquamarine #2 (Room Host: Kourtnie White)

Universal design for Learning: A Framework for Modeling, Teaching, and Practicing Character in the Classroom (*Hannah Kennedy, Kate Scarborough, Jeanelle Day, Tarsha Shepard*)

Cultivating the Common Good: Transforming the Academic Workplace into a Community of Character (*Kara Chism & Clara Gerhardt*)

Coral Reef (Room Host: Les Ennis)

Building Character with AI (*Reenay Rogers*)

Teaching Ethical AI Use Across Diverse Course Formats in Educator Preparation (*Celeste Wheat, Jan Miller*)

Emerald Coast (Room Host: Amany Selah)

Bridling Character Equine-Assisted Learning and Virtue Ethics (*Mary Lombardo-Graves*)

Implementing Character in an Alternative Learning Environment (*Rob Williams*)

1:50-3:30 pm Domain #2: Moral

Emerald Coast

Wednesday, May 13, 2025

7:15-8:00 am	Breakfast	<i>White Sands</i>
8:00-9:30 am	Domain #3: Performance	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
9:30-10:30 am	Breakout Session #3	

Aquamarine #1 (Room Host: Kate Scarborough)

More than a Baby: Infant caregiving and character development (*Kayla Wenth & Clara Gerhardt*)

Character in Action: Lessons from the Hundred Acre Wood (*Jan Miller & Denise Knight*)

Aquamarine #2 (Room Host: Andrea Nolan)

Beyond Isolation: Critical Friendship in Action (*Lori Doyle & Kara Chism*)

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution as Relationship (*Les Ennis, Lisa Beckham, Jane Cobia*)

Coral Reef (Room Host: Jonathan Davis)

Disrupting Our Busy Lives with Time and Space for Innovative Thinking (*Nancy Winfrey*)

AI as a Partner for Character Development (*Lance Forman*)

10:30-10:45 am	BREAK	
10:45 am-12:15 pm	Domain #4: Civic	<i>Emerald Coast</i>
12:15-12:45 pm	Lunch	<i>White Sands</i>
12:45-1:00 pm	Closing Event	<i>White Sands</i>

Breakout Session 1

Aquamarine #1

Teacher Buy In to Character Education in Middle Schools

This session explores the "how" of implementing sustainable character education in middle schools. Using the EPIS Framework, we share qualitative insights from National Schools of Character on strategies that foster educator commitment within the unique developmental landscape of the middle grades, with a focus on teacher buy-in as a critical factor. Designed for teachers and administrators, this session provides actionable approaches to move beyond theory and build enduring, successful character programs.

Character, Conduct and Connection: What makes a difference and why?

Good character implies cultivation of values in our personal and moral lives and creating and sustaining environments expressing these values. Learners who feel connected, safe, and accepted within their school community are more engaged in learning and achieve better outcomes. Carefully coordinated activities, tasks and learning materials require young people to deliberate over ethical choices. Character virtues strengthen a sense of belonging, shaping a common culture, a shared language and set of values across the community. Enrichment opportunities allow for exploration, appropriate risk-taking, and extending comfort zones, while strengthening connection and importantly a sense of belonging.

Aquamarine #2

The Power of Place: Studying Character in Geographical Context

Place-based education (PBE) utilizes public spaces to make learning engaging and meaningful. In natural environments, historical sites, or unique spaces educators can leverage the "power of place" to shape our thoughts, emotions, and sense of agency. Combining PBE with character development is an experiential method to unpack the way virtuous living guides our navigation of our environments and belief systems, to see the impact of exemplars in context, and to articulate the actions we have been inspired to take ourselves. This presentation shares three PBE stories sponsored by the Program for Leadership and Character but designed and facilitated in different ways.

Teaching Character without DEI: Implications for Justice, Equity, and Empathy in Teacher Education

The elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in higher education undermines faculty capacity to support student learning outcomes central to teacher accreditation, including ethical practice, equity-centered instruction, and social responsibility. Accreditation standards emphasize candidates' ability to foster inclusive learning environments, engage diverse learners, and model justice and empathy as professional dispositions. When DEI structures are removed, faculty face constraints in curriculum design and pedagogical practice, limiting students' opportunities to develop critical reflection, cultural competence, and moral reasoning. This erosion weakens candidates' readiness for PK-12 classrooms and compromises higher education's role in preparing educators committed to equitable and just teaching.

Breakout Session 1 Continued

Coral Reef

Cleared for Takeoff: Character in Action - Leadership Lessons from the Blue Angels

When the stakes are high and the margin for error is zero, character shows up fast. This interactive breakout session uses the Blue Angels as a powerful metaphor for character in action. Through fast-paced leadership scenarios, participants explore how moral, civic, intellectual, and performance character guide real-time decision-making under pressure. Grounded in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues framework, the session delivers practical tools for leading with trust, precision, and shared responsibility—together, in formation.

A Character Coaching Model for Student Success and Flourishing

This session introduces Carson-Newman University's Student Success Character Coaching model designed to cultivate character while strengthening academic success and student flourishing. Initially piloted during the Fall 2024 semester with first-year student athletes, the model integrates coaching with intentional character formation. By focusing on the performance virtue, the model equips students to use their personal strengths, discipline, reflection, and goal setting to build academic success and vocational clarity. The Student Success Character Coaching model, grounded in the Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue framework outlined by Lamb et al. (2022), serves as the conceptual foundation for students' personal growth and character development within the missionally aligned coaching model. Using Lamb et al.'s framework as both a design guide and analytic lens, a qualitative study of twelve student athletes during Fall 2024 was conducted to gain insight into student experiences with the coaching model. Results of the study were used to refine the model for implementation with Academic Recovery students during the 2025–26 academic year.

Designed for student success professionals, athletic staff, faculty mentors, and administrators, the session highlights how coaching supports transformational learning by helping students identify their God-given talents, strengthen virtue, and develop practical wisdom. Presenters will share early outcomes from athlete implementation and outline expansion to Academic Recovery students (Fall 2025) and future Academic Skills Enhancement cohorts (Fall 2026). Participants will leave with concrete tools, including a coaching protocol, reflection prompts, and implementation strategies that can be adapted across diverse campus contexts.

Emerald Coast

Formative and Informative - Character (Walks) in Action

Character Walks are structured school visits that help educators observe moral, civic, intellectual, performance, and spiritual character practices in authentic settings. Led by higher education faculty and a K–12 administrator experienced with National Schools of Character work, this table talk highlights how Character Walks are both formative for participants and informative for schools. Visiting educators gain professional learning by seeing character embedded in instruction, leadership, and culture, while host schools identify a problem of practice and receive focused observation feedback aligned to improvement goals.

KARE-ing About Character: A Design Tool for Cultivating Virtue in Programs and Courses

KARE-ing About Character is a practical design tool that helps faculty, staff, and program leaders intentionally cultivate virtue through existing programs and courses. The session introduces the KARE model—Knowing, Acting, Realigning, and Encouraging—as a framework for aligning activities with character formation goals, identifying design gaps, and strengthening learning experiences so they support meaningful, sustained growth in virtue.

Breakout Session 2

Aquamarine #1

Houston we have a problem: Character-Driven Leadership in Turbulent Times

Higher education leadership faces unique challenges which require steady leadership by people anchored in constructive values while being guided by character informed beacons. This session explores how we can use positive character traits—specifically integrity, humility, courage, empathy, and perseverance—as an internal anchor. By shifting from reactive, fear-based decision-making to a character-centered approach, leaders can foster resilience and stability. Through case examples, participants will learn how to lead with compassionate, ethical, and steady action, supporting staff and student success while navigating intense institutional volatility. This session offers a framework for leading with integrity during difficult times.

Building Character Through Teaching Teamwork in the College Classroom

Higher education leadership faces unique challenges which require steady leadership by people anchored in constructive values while being guided by character informed beacons. This session explores how we can use positive character traits—specifically integrity, humility, courage, empathy, and perseverance—as an internal anchor. By shifting from reactive, fear-based decision-making to a character-centered approach, leaders can foster resilience and stability. Through case examples, participants will learn how to lead with compassionate, ethical, and steady action, supporting staff and student success while navigating intense institutional volatility. This session offers a framework for leading with integrity during difficult times.

Aquamarine #2

Universal Design for Learning: A Framework for Modeling, Teaching and Practicing Character Education in the Classroom

As we endeavor to teach, model, and practice

character in our classrooms, UDL provides a promising, practical way to do so. The three guiding principles of Universal Design for Learning are: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of action/expression. By adopting the principles of universal design for learning, educators proactively plan, implement, and assess in a manner that meets the needs of every learner. This means that we recognize the diverse strengths, preferences, abilities, and challenges of every student. Now more than ever, our students bring with them a vast range of experiences, abilities, talents, and interests. UDL provides an avenue for differentiation and intentional instruction that meets every student where they are. As we consider ways to practically model, teach, and practice strong character in the classroom, UDL offers a practical and effective model. In this presentation, we will teach, model, and discuss methods for using the Universal Design for Learning framework as a means for developing character in the higher education classroom. Through interactive discussions, participants will take away practical strategies for promoting character through multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression in the classroom.

Cultivating the Common Good: Transforming the Academic Workplace into a Community of Character

The integration of character education and the concomitant values into the higher education workplace is vital for institutional flourishing. This session explores strategies for transforming professional environments into "communities of character" by aligning daily operations with core values like integrity, respect, and humility. We examine practical implementation methods, including collaborative initiatives and value-based professional development. Attendees will discover how fostering a virtue-centric atmosphere enhances employee engagement, reduces ethical friction, and models excellence for the student body. By prioritizing character, institutions can move beyond mere compliance to create a transformative culture of mutual respect and shared purpose.

Breakout Session 2 Continued

Coral Reef

Building Character with AI

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes embedded in teaching, learning, and assessment, educator preparation programs face a growing responsibility to prepare future teachers for ethical, values-centered AI use. Grounded in *Character in Action*, this session reframes AI as a tool for character education rather than solely an academic integrity concern. Participants explore practical strategies for integrating AI into educator preparation coursework to foster ethical decision-making, professional responsibility, empathy, and reflective practice. Through real-world instructional scenarios, preservice teachers engage with AI for planning, feedback, and data analysis while critically reflecting on bias, authorship, accountability, and the moral dimensions of teaching.

Teaching Ethical AI Use Across Diverse Course Formats in Educator Preparation

This interactive presentation demonstrates practical, character-centered approaches to teaching ethical artificial intelligence (AI) use in colleges of education, using the University of West Alabama as a case example. Ethical AI instruction is embedded across multiple course types, including competency-based programs, traditional in-person courses, and online learning, so students are prepared to apply AI responsibly in both their own learning and future professional practice. Participants will engage with sample syllabus language, assignment prompts, and online module components, gaining concrete tools to teach ethical AI use while fostering moral, intellectual, and performance character in both K–12 and higher education contexts.

Emerald Coast

Bridling Character Equine-Assisted Learning and Virtue Ethics

This session explores how equine-assisted learning (EAL) can serve as a transformative framework for developing timeless virtues—such as humility, patience, courage, and empathy in modern educational and leadership settings. Drawing from ancient philosophical and spiritual traditions that emphasize character formation through relationship and reflection, this presentation connects these enduring principles with contemporary experiential practices involving horses. Participants will learn how the nonverbal, relational feedback horses provide creates opportunities for authentic self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and emotional regulation skills essential for today's complex world.

Implementing Character in an Alternative Learning Environment

This session will discuss how one alternative school has implemented character to transform its learning environment. After attending the Character-Centered Leadership Summer Institute at Arkansas State University, the director and principal of Success Achievement Academy began work on transforming the culture of his school. This table discussion will center around the plan and progress of this initiative.

Breakout Session 3

Aquamarine #1

More than a Baby: Infant caregiving and character development

Experiential learning supports moral development by placing college students in real-life situations that require responsibility, empathy, and ethical decision-making. How we care for infants and young children is an expression of our values. Character education can be fostered through experiential learning. An infant caregiving simulation using a robotic baby challenges students to respond to ongoing needs, manage frustration, and prioritize another's well-being. Students discuss morality as applied to practiced care and accountability. Students connect their emotional responses to personal values and beliefs about caregiving and responsibility. Experiential learning promotes moral growth, empathy, and commitment, which present as expressions of character.

Character in Action: Lessons from the Hundred Acre Wood

This session brings Character in Action to life through the timeless stories of the Hundred Acre Wood. Using Winnie-the-Pooh characters as a narrative framework, participants explore how virtues are demonstrated through everyday actions, relationships, and leadership decisions. Attendees will share examples from their own contexts and reflect on how character domains move from theory into practice. This engaging, story-based session models how virtues can be lived out consistently, relationally, and authentically across educational and organizational settings.

Aquamarine #2

Beyond Isolation: Critical Friendship in Action

Higher education institutions increasingly recognize the importance of character development initiatives, yet many operate in isolation without systematic protocols for evaluating effectiveness. This interactive session introduces participants to the neo-Aristotelian framework of critical friendship, and a structured approach to providing and receiving feedback for the good of the other. Concepts will be applied to character education program assessment across K-12 and higher education contexts, and participants will engage directly in a critical friendship activity, experiencing firsthand how structured peer feedback can strengthen program effectiveness while building collaborative networks across schools and institutions. Through guided practice, attendees will learn to offer constructive critique and receive feedback with openness, thus embodying character in action rather than merely discussing it theoretically.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution as Relationship

This session will explore the building of relationships in the context of negotiation and the resolution of conflict. Particular emphasis will be focused on the intersection between conflict as a positive catalyst in the building of trust and ongoing relationship among otherwise opposed parties. The concept of a "Wise Agreement" will be introduced as a catalyst for ongoing dialog.

Breakout Session 3 Continued

Coral Reef Round Tables

Disrupting Our Busy Lives with Time and Space for Innovative Thinking

As character educators we know the importance of good programming. In a busy academic environment, however, time to plan can lose priority status in our calendars. And although new ideas would benefit from the insight and experience of our colleagues, it is a challenge to create time for that synergistic work. This roundtable shares a recent Thinking Retreat, designed to promote new knowledge creation and collaboration at a retreat center, redirecting our focus from daily work to a space of possibility and an investment in wellbeing. Let's talk about ways to move from good ideas to action!

AI as a Partner for Character Development

Explore and discuss how AI chatbots can support leadership preparation by facilitating moral reasoning and ethical decision-making development in aspiring school leaders. This roundtable discussion focuses on innovative AI chatbot tools that work alongside high-quality leadership development resources. Participants will discover how preparation programs use these AI applications as a thought partner for character development to help candidates build greater perspective to dilemmas, understand contextual complexity, and practice empathy. Learn practical integration strategies for university courses, district leadership academies, and aspiring leader programs, demonstrating character in action through the moral domain.



7TH Annual Character Convening Evaluation

At the indicated time, please take a few minutes to complete this short evaluation of your experience at the convening using the QR Code.



Don't forget to tag #CC2026 in all your photos!

**THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING! SEE YOU IN 2027 AT THE 8TH
ANNUAL CHARACTER CONVENING!**