

## What Makes a Good University Student?

Margarita Mauri Álvarez, Begoña Román Maestre

Faculty of Philosophy (University of Barcelona)

**\*Corresponding Author:** Margarita Mauri Álvarez, Faculty of Philosophy (University of Barcelona)

**Abstract:** In order to answer the question what makes a good university student, this article is divided into two parts. The first one deals with the importance of the environment: the university as a community of student and professors. This community has a mission: to train individuals who are able to place their knowledge at the service of their peers, social advancement and personal progress. However, the university requires not only knowledge, but also virtues. These virtues are acquired in the environment that surrounds and accompanies students. The second part focuses on the characterizations of a good student: attitude and conduct; capacities of organization and responsibility in learning; relationships within the institution (professors, classmates, non-teaching staff); attitude in class and virtues. The main virtues of a university student are: truthfulness and honesty, courage; humility; perseverance; patience and generosity. These reflections at a time of pandemic and empty classrooms aim to be a reminder of exactly what is at stake.

**Keywords:** University, mission, community, good student, virtues.

### 1. THE ENVIRONMENT: THE UNIVERSITY AND ITS GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

In the wake of several centuries of the university's existence and its social acceptance as the institution entrusted with higher education, it may seem odd to ask what makes a good university student, particularly given the seeming obviousness of the answer: being a good university student means getting good (that is, high) marks. However, from a philosophical perspective and more specifically from the viewpoint of moral philosophy, it makes a great deal of sense to reconsider the concept of 'good student', because the answer is neither so simple nor so obvious. While good marks are doubtless a necessary condition, they are not sufficient to make a good student. Good marks overlook the means employed to achieve them. Nor do they take into account the kind of person that one is, the relationships that one forms at university, or the commitments that are involved in being a university student.

#### 1.1. An Interestingly Obvious Question

Reducing what makes a good university student to a single dimension, that of knowledge, is insufficient. While knowledge may be paramount, it is not enough to measure performance by the sole yardstick of marks, because marks disregard the multidimensionality inherent in the concept of 'good student'. The activity of a university student involves more than the achievement of certain results. It also entails progress towards the attainment of higher levels of mastery in a student's chosen field of study and in the dispositions that a student must develop. Passage through the university must transform the student, who must acquire learning and training.

Attending university – that is, really being at university – is literally a work in progress, because the student is engaged in an active state: in other words, students go to university for the purpose of studying and making progress, not merely passing tests and earning a degree. The process is not mechanical, nor does it amount to an accumulation of credits. Credits attest to and accredit that a student not only has the knowledge that she is supposed to have, but also that she is worthy of being given credence and trust because she has proven willing to put herself at the service of the profession for which she is being prepared.

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When the aim is to go beyond expertise and experience to bestow prestige on a profession through a university degree, a student's time at university must also involve forging a way of being and acting. However, viewing university only as a means of social advancement can also lead to an instrumentalization of both knowledge and the university itself. According to this view, a student becomes a good student in order to obtain better job opportunities. While such an aim is not illegitimate in and of itself, however, it becomes so if it is the student's sole aim and supplants the chief goal, which is to learn, acquire knowledge, develop an open and critical mind, and even innovate and expand the store of available knowledge.

Not only does a university degree attest to the knowledge acquired by a student, but it also ensures that the student has developed competences that include not only knowledge, but also attitudes and values. This raises one of the core points: how to measure the acquisition of attitudes and values. A good student is one who studies well, but this fact may not always be reflected in her marks.

The university offers higher education in studies that incoming students themselves select. This selection is a key factor in the process of becoming a good student. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that a student's field of study is as freely chosen as the demands that the field places on the student. The expression 'higher education' implies that the university imparts high-level knowledge, which should suffice to understand that a student who follows the principle of least effort will fall short of what university requires: such a student will not really be at university, but merely passing through it. If a student limits herself to passing exams and does not build a solid structure for her knowledge or make progress in the formation of her character so as to continue learning and improving, then we cannot say that she is a 'good student'.

If a student attains the desired marks, but only through immoral or illegal means (such as plagiarism or impersonation) while thriving at the expense of others' efforts (for example, by asking for class notes or work done by classmates who follow the pace of study and learning in a disciplined manner and scrupulously meet the due dates for assignments) and taking advantage of all the work that she herself has not done, it is still the case that we cannot speak of a 'good student'.

With this kind of student, the whole suffers a loss. If the practices of a poor student were generalized, the university would not be a community with a goal or shared purpose that requires its members to pay heed to its mission and the institution. The purpose is not to get high marks; one must not only get high marks but also acquire sound learning and consolidate such learning over time. The university seeks not only to provide higher education, but also to be a community of students and professors who are united in the search for truth.<sup>1</sup>

For this very reason, there are norms, values and virtues inherent to being a university student; someone entering university must willingly accept them. If individuals do not accept them but instead limit themselves to instrumentalizing the institution for their own ends, it harms the institution's dynamics. A student, therefore, must be and feel herself to be a participant in the community and not merely someone drifting passively through it. This means attending class and joining in the activities that take place at university. Studying is a verb, an activity, which requires the pursuit of knowledge in dialogue with texts, professors and classmates.

University studies demand discipline and perseverance: giving the least effort, even if the results are good, is not a sound yardstick. Nor is it sound to take the opposite approach: it is not a matter of the student pursuing her learning as an autodidactic, because the professor is there precisely to provide guidance and lend a hand. It is not possible to require what the professor does not give. This is especially important at a time when it is necessary for professors to strike the right balance between facilitating the learning of students and challenging them to make their own effort. Putting in the least effort does not characterize a good student.

Effort is necessary to arrive at an effective satisfaction in knowledge, personal excellence and the pleasure that knowledge brings. These are internal goods that can only be obtained by those who enter honestly into cooperative activities that seek the truth, which is precisely what the university is.<sup>2</sup> Joy

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<sup>1</sup> Esteban, F. & Román, B. *¿Quo vadis Universidad?* Barcelona. UOC, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre, A. *Tras la virtud*, Barcelona. Crítica, 1997.

should accompany the years of learning at university. The good student enjoys university life; she does not merely endure or suffer through it. It is a good sign that she misses it when she is no longer there.

### 1.2. A Community of Students and Professors with a Mission

The higher education taught at university is not only the last stage of a student's academic career, but also her preparation for responsible professional practice in the future. The decision to pursue studies at a university faculty requires that the student is up to the intellectual and moral demands, and the moral dimension must take precedence over the intellectual dimension because one of the purposes of knowledge is personal and community excellence.

The professions entrust the institution of the university with the training of individuals who will take responsibility in the future for the services to which their chosen profession is dedicated. When the issue is a matter not of professions but of personal training, the institution is charged with offering a service that enables individuals to improve.

A good student goes beyond excellence in her subject matter to become part of a given faculty at a specific university. Respect both for the rules of the organization and for the organization itself is another dimension that is necessary to consider. Every student represents the faculty and university to which she belongs and her poor conduct can be harmful to them.

There are certain norms and values, such as camaraderie and the love of knowledge, which can only be taken up and embodied through daily participation in the community, through appreciation and enjoyment in being part of the community. To this end, an awareness of membership and a sense of belonging are not lesser issues in the creation of a good student. For this very reason, welcoming events and farewell ceremonies are necessary, and so are the many cultural activities and festivities of university life, because the community matters above and beyond the marks that a student obtains. Building a sense of belonging and even a sense of pride is part of the undertaking that universities have pursued throughout their long history.

Caring for the institution and its members involves taking on the mission with which it is entrusted: to train individuals who are able to place their knowledge at the service of their peers, social advancement and personal progress. This is hard to achieve without a number of virtues. Indeed, as we shall see, the university requires not only knowledge, but also virtues. These virtues are acquired in the environment that surrounds and accompanies students.

The dialogic community of professors and students that makes up the university is hierarchical: a professor has greater knowledge of a subject and takes responsibility for the group and its dynamics. The professor/student asymmetry gives rise to distinct responsibilities.

The university is at the service of the student, but the student, whether or not a future professional, does not learn only for herself. Knowledge is not only for the one who learns it. Rather, it can be transferred to others and even expanded if the student conducts research. In a sense, every student owes a debt for what she has been taught: she must contribute to its dissemination, its expansion, its application and its practice. Being at university, therefore, is a process that has more than a personal impact. It also has social implications insofar as the university is the driving force of progress (understood as overcoming ignorance and poverty in the broadest sense).

The emergence of varied forms of learning, such as in person, online, virtual (synchronous and asynchronous) and blended, together with the rapid changes that the university has gone through in recent years, calls for a reconsideration of the question of what makes a good university student. A time of pandemic and lockdowns has made clear what was obvious to see: it is important for students to have close, free-flowing contact with their professors and classmates. Physical distance cannot be a social distance.

Proper studying is rather more complex than obtaining an excellent mark. It is a personal journey and a process of joining and fitting into a community of study. Taking for granted that we already know what makes a good student has impoverished our response by making the question shallower. Amid the circumstances of a global pandemic, accelerating processes of learning and learning's expiration, and the selection or imposition of virtual or face-to-face encounters, asking what makes a good

student should not be regarded as odd. Rather, it should be regarded as necessary so that we do not lose our way. Asking where the student's dedication must lie during her time at university leads to a reflection on the university's ethos, which is lived through those who inhabit it.

### 1.3. On the University: Ideas and Beliefs

José Ortega y Gasset said that we create ideas, but we do not create beliefs: we adopt them.<sup>3</sup> University students in their first year must be reminded where they are, why and for whom. They must be reminded that merely settling for getting through their exams without attaining knowledge, or being satisfied with simply passing, is not enough to be a good student. From the very start, it must be made clear who is cheated when students attend university with their sights set solely on obtaining marks.

There is a common view that young people are increasingly less prepared. From an ethical viewpoint, we should run the risks inherent in statements of this sort, regardless of their truth. The first of these risks is that discourses of this kind can be performative: a professor's opinion of a group or specific students can have an impact on what the group or students believe about themselves. And if a student defends her worth, her striving for recognition<sup>4</sup> can strain the environment and make it an unsuitable place for healthy learning.

The second of the risks to be avoided is cronyism or favouritism, understood as a kind of treatment that is given to students as peers and as customers to satisfy. Participation, satisfaction and motivation in the process of learning are all important. However, the university is a learning community that provides knowledge that students do not possess and competences that they must acquire. There is no room either for deceit about the knowledge gained by a student or for any other spurious grounds on which to certify that the student has attained what, in reality, she has not attained. The student is a key member of the community, not a customer, although this fact is not incompatible with taking into account her opinions.

Another risk that must be avoided is infantilism. University students are no longer children, but adults. Certain conflicts must not be settled as if they were disputes at school. As adults, university students need to be able to manage any conflict that happens to arise with classmates or professors on their own.

Beyond plagiarism, impersonation, and passing exams and courses by hook or by crook, it is necessary to raise the broader issue of integrity, which not only means being honest and coherent, but also being part of something greater that one must fit into and *adapt to*. As a student, one must step up to the challenge. And what is the challenge? To develop one's own capacities, assisted by the instructors and classmates in one's selected faculty in order to meet the task effectively and appropriately.

## 2. THE CHARACTERIZATION OF A GOOD STUDENT

The expression 'good student' characterizes a person who carries out the activity that pertains to her, the activity of learning, excellently. It calls for a set of personal dispositions and the demonstration of capacity through actions. A purpose that does not reach beyond intentional limits does not make a student excellent. If desire is the first step toward excellence in any activity, the gap between initial desire and result is measured in time and effort, which cannot be avoided.

Below the characterization of a good student is explored in two areas, the internal and the external, which are joined by a causal link.

### 2.1. Attitude and Conduct

The moral and psychological character of the university student is the result of a host of variables, both constitutive and environmental, from which and in which the student builds her life. Upbringing, role models, habits and genetics, among other factors, determine the personal qualities of a student. All students do not have the same personal qualities or the same preparation: they have neither the

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<sup>3</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J. *Ideas y creencias y otros ensayos*. Madrid. Alianza editorial, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Honneth, A. *La lucha por el reconocimiento*, Barcelona: Crítica, 1997.

same natural capacities, nor have they acquired the same abilities and virtues; from this viewpoint, therefore, they are not equally ready at the starting point. It is precisely at this starting point that the willingness to achieve excellence is a key factor. Of course, willingness does not pave the way; it only helps the student to remain resolute in her journey.

The student's assessment of herself requires self-knowledge that encompasses not only her capacities but also her desires. Being certain in the choice of a degree and taking on the responsibility that such a degree entails are key aspects of an activity well performed. Both the confidence that a student will be able to achieve what she sets her mind to and the conviction that she will make every effort to do so will contribute to her having the proper attitude.

One of the essential elements of being a good student is enthusiasm for the chosen field of study. This choice must be made taking into account the student's own talents and her interest in the subject. Failure in higher education is often due to the limited interest that it inspires in students (whether the cause lies in them or in the institution), the poor fit between a student's selected field of study and her capacities, or the lack of arduous, sustained attitude of dedication. The student's attitude serves to gauge the degree of commitment that she will maintain in what she is doing, and this in turn relates to the entirety of her conduct within the university institution.

The attitude that the student brings to her field of study will determine her performance in the field and her conduct toward people and the institution. The student acts and learns, corrects herself and learns, but without a prior attitude of effort, her activity will be limited to merely passing through the university.

### **2.2. Capacities of Organization and Responsibility in Learning**

The organization of time and work is crucial for making progress in learning and meeting the demands placed on a student. Students often divide their time between studying and other activities and they tend to be unrealistic about the attention that their studies require.<sup>5</sup> Excellence demands time and commitment; it is not compatible with haste or improvisation. A realistic attitude aligns an individual's possibilities and time to the demands of her field of study. Managing time and workload enables the student to cope successfully with the consolidation of learning, the required due dates for work, and exam preparation. Similarly, a good distribution of tasks leads to an appropriate response to the commitments that the student makes to other classmates in the case of assignments that involve collaboration.

Every student is responsible for her own training; however, this statement does not suggest that she is the only one to bear responsibility. That said, her interest must be the greatest. Recent contributions in pedagogy emphasize that a student must not be reduced to a mere receptacle for the knowledge that a professor imparts. The student must be an active participant in learning. This means that she must 'seek' and not merely 'receive'. That is, the student must be an active force in the construction of her own learning.<sup>6</sup> Translating these ideas into actions supposes that the ideal student is one who reads and expands knowledge. She does not settle for merely taking notes on what the professor explains in class.

### **2.3. Relationships within the Institution: Professors, Classmates, Non-Teaching Staff**

A student's relationships within the university can be addressed in relation to three personal circles: professors, classmates and non-teaching staff.

#### a) Professors

Mutual respect must govern the relationship between students and professors. This respect must be demonstrated both within the classroom and beyond. Respect is displayed in a student's way of addressing the professor, how the student formulates questions for the professor, and the student's completion of assignments by agreed due dates.

#### b) Classmates

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<sup>5</sup>The greater the number of activities that a student may engage in alongside her university studies, the lower the value that she will place on the quality of her studies.

<sup>6</sup> Bonwell, C. C. & Eison, J. A. 'Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom', *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 1991.



The relationship with classmates, with whom a student shares objectives, efforts and time, must be collaborative so that it results in mutual assistance. Rivalry or competition can be stimulating, but only if the purpose is collaborative learning. Contributing to the academic progress of fellow classmates and accepting their help fosters a spirit of unity in class that will result in better work together.

### c) Non-teaching staff

There are many times when students have dealings with non-teaching staff at university. At all such times, the relationship must be governed by respect and good manners.

## 2.4. Attitude in Class

Attentiveness, together with participation, is the chief attitude to adopt in class. By showing an active disposition, a student contributes to the achievement of the class's goals. In addition to paying attention to the professor's explanations, a good student always maintains an attitude of respect and consideration toward her classmates in whatever class activities may arise, such as student presentations and dialogues with other classmates.

## 2.5. The Virtues of a Good Student

Being a good student is the result of a set of virtues or qualities of character that are manifest in what a student says and does. A student will already possess some of these qualities as a result of her education prior to university, but she will acquire others in her time at university. There are different kinds of virtues that the philosophical tradition has distinguished in terms of knowledge and morality. These virtues may be divided up for the purpose of explication. In reality, however, insofar as they refer to the same individual, their interaction is absolute. Below is a description of the virtues or qualities of character that pertain to a good student.

### a) Truthfulness and honesty

Every assignment that a student hands in must be governed by truthfulness, which is a quality of character defined by actions that are guided by an interest in showing the truth, in not distorting, falsifying or plagiarizing the results of research. While curiosity and a desire to know may drive a student's investigation and her pursuit of new knowledge, she must be guided by a firm determination to be truthful. Through her interest in truthfulness, a student shows that she possesses the virtue of honesty, which is necessary for anyone who tackles issues related to the truth.

### b) Courage

The virtue of courage, which is the capacity to face the difficulties and hard work that studies demand, is essential because it ensures that the student does not abandon her desired aims when her field of study requires a level of commitment that appears less attractive than other options for recreation or leisure. The virtue of courage helps the student to hold firm in the priorities that she has set for herself. She also needs the virtue of courage to come to terms with poor results and corrections, accept failure, and dispel the paralyzing fear of being unable to overcome difficult situations. Courage is the opposite not only of cowardice, but also of indolence and passivity.<sup>7</sup>

### c) Humility

Practising the virtue of humility involves a recognition of the limits of one's own possibilities and also an acceptance of the superiority of others in whatever area it may arise. The virtue of humility must be understood as an openness to what others (i.e. anyone with whom a student may come into contact at university) can contribute to what the student does not know. As a result, humility does not nullify what each individual thinks, but to the contrary it helps to expand it. The attitude that goes hand in hand with humility is confidence, which the student must place in everyone that she thinks can help her to make progress in her training. The humble person accepts advice and correction, in short, anything intended to bolster her advancement.

### d) Perseverance

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<sup>7</sup> Comte-Sponville, A. *Pequeño tratado de las grandes virtudes*. Madrid. Espasa-Calpe, 1998. p.66.

Closely linked to the virtue of courage, perseverance ensures that the student remains committed to her effort when effort is essential to achieving her desired goals. This virtue prevents a paralyzing disappointment when a student's efforts fall short of expectations or when the way forward proves arduous and demands sacrifices. Perseverance involves sustained stamina when the reward for a student's hard work is still far off.

### e) Patience

Patience is the capacity of knowing how to wait for the achievement of a student's desired objectives. It entails confident waiting, or hopefulness, that a student will reach her goal even though the road may be long and beset by difficulties. A lack of patience stands in the way of remaining committed to the effort and striving to reach the target.

### f) Generosity

Generosity is one of the virtues that contemporary virtue ethics calls another-regarding virtue, that is, a virtue displayed in relation to other people. At first glance, it may appear that generosity, understood as the virtue that enables one to share of oneself with others while expecting nothing in return, provides a benefit only to the recipient. In reality, however, a generous student also benefits from her own acts of generosity in that she learns from herself and from others. For example, it often happens that a student, while dedicating part of her time to the clarification of some issue for a classmate, gains a much better understanding of the matter herself. Teamwork also requires this virtue: sharing information, time and effort yields benefits for every member of a team.

The attitude and virtues described above correspond to what has been called a 'good student', that is, a student able to accept the responsibilities that arise from her activity and take charge of the development and progress of her academic and personal life.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

Being a good university student requires that the student is cognizant of the place where she finds herself in order to know how to be and act there. The university, as the institution entrusted with higher education, has a mission: to increase knowledge and foster social progress through the preparation of individuals who are competent both technically and as human beings. If a student lacks an awareness and sense of belonging to a community of students and professors, it can impede the accomplishment of the mission. Indeed, this can happen when a student's good performance is confused with the mere achievement of good marks.

Forging the virtues of a university student is a fundamental task that the university must undertake as it has always done. In doing so, it will surely survive and retain its prestige and credibility. The foregoing reflections at a time of pandemic and empty classrooms aim to be a reminder of exactly what is at stake.

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### AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



**Margarita Mauri**, is Professor of Ethics at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Barcelona. Degree in Philosophy from the University of Barcelona in 1980. Extraordinary Degree Award. Doctor of Philosophy in 1986. She directs the International Group *Stágeira. Aristotelian Studies of Practical Philosophy*. She also conducts two permanent research seminars: *Aristotle Seminar* and *Iris Murdoch Seminar*. She is currently working on a book on *Aristotle's Ethics*.



**Begoña Román Maestre**, holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Barcelona. Between 1996 and 2007 she headed the Department of Ethics at University Ramon Llull (Barcelona) and she is currently professor in the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Barcelona. In addition, she is Chairperson of the Ethics Committee of Catalanian Social Services and member of Bioethics Committee of Catalonia. Her area of specialization is Bioethics and Ethics applied to professional and organizational environments. She has published 60 articles in specialized journals.

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