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# A Diagnostic Study on Levels of College Students' Characteristics for Liberal Arts Education in Fostering Characteristic Competencies

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## Abstract

*Many South Korean universities highly value and place much investment on the development of students' characteristics as their core competency, offering corresponding educational initiatives and programs. The present study specifically evaluated the level of characteristic competency among freshmen at C University, in which characteristic development is at the central to the institution's core competency. The researchers conducted the study to utilize the findings to inform the design of liberal arts courses and extracurricular programs. The study recruited 210 freshmen at C University in Changwon, South Korea. To ensure anonymity of the respondents, an online questionnaire was administered during the data collection period (i.e., between December 5th and 7th, 2022) with a total of 201 faithful responses finally analyzed. The results showed an average characteristic competency level of 4.21 out of 5 among the freshman participants. Notably, the highest score was ranked in the 'righteous domain' (4.27±0.66), whereas the 'behavioral domain' scored the lowest (4.08±0.77). These findings provide valuable insights for the development of educational programs that aim to promote characteristic competency among university students. The implications of the findings are further discussed.*

*Keywords: College Students, Characteristics, Higher Education, Liberal Arts Education, Diagnostic Study*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Competency is the most important notion when discussing what qualifications educators are to foster in the 21st century society, which is also defined as a knowledge and information-based society. Regarding the question of what kind of education universities should provide to students, Jeong (2016) asserted that the core notion of education required in the future society is also changing from 'knowledge' to 'competency' [1]. As higher education encounters increased demands to play a central role in fostering creative individuals who can generate knowledge and value, the competency of college students has received greater amount of

attention in line with the universal phenomenon of global higher education [2]. Additionally, in this regard, Moscardini, Strachan, & Vlasova (2022) proposed that universities need to focus on promoting students' core competencies, including social networks, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose, for radical social changes are evidently to emerge.

Core competencies refer to the combination of cognitive, affective, and social skills that are essential for learners to maintain competitiveness in their current educational and professional endeavors (see [4] for review). Cognitive skills consist of knowledge specific to college majors and proficiency in critical thinking, while emotional skills are defined as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy. Social skills are linked to effective collaboration, communication, and proactive participation among others. College students' core competencies are related to both hard skills, chiefly rooted in cognitive abilities and academic knowledge, as well as soft skills, encompassing non-cognitive attributes such as problem-solving, communication, and self-management.

The cultivation of core competencies among college students is emphasized in most developed countries, and as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005) [5] raised the need to promote the core competencies through the DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) project, a door of opportunity opened to spark discussions in this regard. Universities globally are proposing a 'competency-based curriculum' as a concrete means to nurture competencies, which refers to the realization of the curriculum by focusing on competencies. Park [6] stated that the competency-based curriculum is to declare core competencies as an important element in the curriculum equal to content knowledge that need to be achieved through education. The competency-based curriculum aims to integrate both academic and practical knowledge, allows connection with out-of-school learning in the way the curriculum is operated, and emphasizes the educational method in which students solve problems and tasks through self-directed knowledge skills, strategies, and reflection. It asserts that knowledge and core competencies are complementary to each other, and aims to internalizing them so that students may acquire ability to utilize the knowledge and resources to various fields. To enhance the aforementioned core competencies, researchers in higher education from both domestic and international universities suggest conducting direct educational initiatives that aim to strengthen core competencies through specialized activities incorporated into either elective or compulsory liberal arts courses [7].

The "Revised Curriculum in 2015" proposed in South Korea aims to promote a fundamental reform of education, so that individuals can enjoy learning and ultimately develop their potentials through competency-oriented revisions that future society requires. It presents the 'creative convergence talent' as the role model of future society talent who can create new values by combining knowledge from various fields with humanistic imagination, science technology creativity, and proper characteristics. The reason why characteristic is emphasized in the current high-tech-based society is because individuals are forced to live with other individuals even with the passage of time. To be more specific, human beings are born in relationships with others, living in them, and are forced to cooperate, compete, and live through the relationships. Characteristic amid the given circumstances becomes the key element to make the relationships sustain and mature.

The specific approaches of characteristic education have developed in different ways through changes of the generations. While the characteristic education in the past was an essential trait for individuals taught at home and schools, the present day sees characteristics as a future competitiveness that a member of a society must possess. The problem is that there is still a lack of specific research conducted on what and how to teach and evaluate characteristics from the perspective of competency-based education on characteristics. Though many higher education institutions set characteristics as a core competency and offer various types of relevant educational programs, it is difficult to find commonalities among them. Additionally, determining whether such university courses effectively promote the character competencies among students remains unclear.

Therefore, the present study aims to diagnose the level of characteristic competency of students at C

University, where characteristic is set as the core competency of the institute, and use the results to establish a plan for liberal arts courses and comparison programs necessary for universities. The study is expected to result in improving the existing characteristic courses into a more rigorous competency-based curriculum, and developing programs that promote college students' characteristic competencies via implementing extracurricular programs.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Selection of the Participants

The participants of this study were freshmen at C University located in Changwon, South Korea, who were enrolling in a compulsory liberal arts course entitled "Future Society and Characteristics. An online questionnaire was conducted for the convenience of anonymity of respondents. The data collection period was from December 5th to 7th, 2022, and a questionnaire URL was installed on the Learning Management System (LMS) to explain the purpose of the study; only students who agreed to participate were allowed to generate responses. A total of 210 participants responded, but 201 responses were used for the final analysis, after excluding unfaithful responses.

### 2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized the college student characteristic questionnaire that Lee et al. proposed [8]. This questionnaire, based on Thomas Lickona's notion of characteristics [9], was developed for the purpose of measuring the characteristic of Korean university students. Its reliability and validity were verified by reflecting previous studies related to characteristic tests, the observation of current university characteristic education programs, and expert opinions. It consists of 60 questions, divided into 14 sub-factors of 3 domains. The student participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale. The sub-factors of the cognitive domain (23 questions) are moral self-awareness, knowledge of moral values, moral reasoning, reflective decision-making, moral self-knowledge (pros and cons), moral self-knowledge (life goals). The sub-factors of the righteous domain (25 questions) are conscience, self-respect, empathy, love of good, self-control, and humility. Finally, the sub-factors of the behavioral domain (12 questions) are competency (will) and habit.

At the time of development of the questionnaire, the Cronbach's α was a total of .96, with 0.91 in cognitive domain, 0.93 in righteous domain, and 0.87 in behavioral domain. The reliability of Cronbach's α in this study was a total of .99, with 0.98 in cognitive domain, 0.98 in righteous domain, and 0.95 in behavioral domain.

The researchers used IBM Statistics 25.0 for data analysis, and the significance level of the results was measured as 0.05 to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. The general characteristics of the participants were obtained using frequency (percentage), and the average and standard deviation of each variable were obtained.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Demographics of the Participants

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the 201 student participants based on their gender, age, GPA in the previous semester, personality, and class participation level.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the participants (N=201)**

| Category | Sub-factor | N(%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 57(28.46) |
| | Female | 127(77.4) |
| **Age(mean)** | | 20.73±4.15 |
| **GPA in the previous** | Higher than 4.0 | 56(27.9) |

| | semester | Between 3.0 and 4.0 | 131(65.1) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Below 3.0 | 14(7.0) |
| | **Personality** | Extrovert | 39(19.4) |
| | | Introvert | 71(35.3) |
| | | Multiplicative | 91(45.3) |
| | **Class participation level** | Passive | 25(12.4) |
| | | Moderate | 131(65.2) |
| | | Active | 45(22.4) |

### 3.2 Level of characteristic competency

The overall mean level of characteristic competency of the student participants was 4.21. When comparing the mean scores by each domain, the scores came out to be in the order of righteous, cognitive, and behavioral domain.

### Table 2. Level of characteristic competency

| Domain | Sub-factor | Item | Mean±SD | Min. | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cognitive Domain** | Moral self-awareness | 1. I recognize the need for honesty to solve a given problem situation. | 4.30±0.75 | 3 | 5 |
| | | 2. I believe we should be interested in social issues conveyed through the mass media. | 4.31±0.79 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 3. I believe that just judgment is needed to solve social problems. | 4.35±0.74 | 3 | 5 |
| | | 4. I believe it is necessary to look up related articles or books to understand the events that are attracting worldwide attention in detail. | 4.18±0.84 | 1 | 5 |
| | | Sub-total | 4.29±0.71 | 2.75 | 5 |
| | Knowledge of moral values | 5. I can explain a situation that requires honesty. | 4.22±0.82 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 6. I can describe the characteristics of a courageous person. | 4.16±0.82 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 7. I can describe the characteristics of a man of good manners. | 4.28±0.77 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 8. I know the learning ethics necessary for my studies. | 4.19±0.81 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 9. I can list the order to be observed as a member of society. | 4.21±0.79 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 10. I can explain human rights. | 4.23±0.81 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 11. I can explain what the inclusive concept of multiculturalism is. | 4.08±0.89 | 1 | 5 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Sub-total | 4.20±0.73 | 2.71 | 5 |
| Moral reasoning | 12. I know why I have to live with the right thing to do. | | 4.30±0.75 | 3 | 5 |
| | 13. I know why society has to go in a desirable direction. | | 4.39±0.72 | 3 | 5 |
| | 14. I know why the world has to go in the right direction. | | 4.28±0.79 | 3 | 5 |
| | | Sub-total | 4.32±0.71 | 3 | 5 |
| Reflective decision-making | 15. I reflect after doing undesirable things (cheating, jaywalking, etc.) | | 4.28±0.80 | 2 | 5 |
| | 16. I look at social issues (racism, violence, etc.) and think back to see if I am at fault as a member. | | 4.22±0.85 | 1 | 5 |
| | 17. I believe we are all responsible for the problems we face globally (environmental pollution, endangered animals, etc.). | | 4.29±0.81 | 1 | 5 |
| | | Sub-total | 4.27±0.76 | 2 | 5 |
| Moral self-knowledge (pros and cons) | 18. I know my strengths. | | 4.14±0.85 | 1 | 5 |
| | 19. I can find a way to compensate for my weakness. | | 4.08±0.88 | 1 | 5 |
| | 20. I know what I don't like. | | 4.29±0.77 | 2 | 5 |
| | | Sub-total | 4.17±0.78 | 1.33 | 5 |
| Moral self-knowledge (life goals) | 21. I know various things about my career path related to my major | | 4.21±0.80 | 1 | 5 |
| | 22. I have a blueprint for my life (short-term planning, long-term planning). | | 4.00±0.96 | 1 | 5 |
| | 23. I have a specific plan for what needs to be done in my 20s. | | 3.97±0.93 | 1 | 5 |
| | | Sub-total | 4.06±0.81 | 1 | 5 |
| | | **Total (Cognitive Domain)** | 4.22±0.68 | 2.65 | 5 |
| **Righteous Domain** | Conscience | 24. I have a guilty conscience when I do something dishonest. | 4.28±0.78 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 25. I have a guilty conscience when I fail to do justice. | 4.27±0.79 | 2 | 5 |
| | | 26. I think there is a duty to keep order. | 4.34±0.75 | 3 | 5 |
| | | 27. After I do something dishonest, I decide not to do it next time. | 4.29±0.77 | 3 | 5 |
| | | 28. If I do something unjust, I decide I won't do it | 4.32±0.77 | 3 | 5 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | next time. | | | |
| | Sub-total | 4.30±0.71 | 3 | 5 |
| Self-respect | 29. I am satisfied with myself. | 4.08±0.90 | 1 | 5 |
| | 30. I believe I can do anything well. | 4.13±0.90 | 1 | 5 |
| | 31. I believe I am a person who has many advantages. | 4.04±0.93 | 1 | 5 |
| | 32. I believe I deserve others' love. | 4.19±0.86 | 1 | 5 |
| | Sub-total | 4.11±0.83 | 1 | 5 |
| Empathy | 33. I want to be considerate of others if possible. | 4.33±0.78 | 2 | 5 |
| | 34. I'm being open to others. | 4.30±0.79 | 2 | 5 |
| | 35. I also accept culture that I have not experienced with an open mind. | 4.21±0.80 | 2 | 5 |
| | 36. When I talk to others, I listen carefully from their point of view. | 4.34±0.75 | 2 | 5 |
| | 37. I can accept other people if they disagree with me, but if it's the right opinion. | 4.38±0.75 | 2 | 5 |
| | Sub-total | 4.32±0.69 | 2.67 | 5 |
| Love of good | 38. When I see a righteous person, I want to resemble him/her. | 4.39±0.77 | 2 | 5 |
| | 39. It is admirable to see someone who acts honestly. | 4.39±0.74 | 2 | 5 |
| | 40. When I see a man of courage, I want to resemble him. | 4.39±0.75 | 2 | 5 |
| | 41. It is admirable to see someone responsible. | 4.42±0.77 | 2 | 5 |
| | Sub-total | 4.40±.71 | 2 | 5 |
| Self-control | 42. I do what I have to do sincerely. | 4.30±0.80 | 2 | 5 |
| | 43. I act as I planned. | 4.14±0.91 | 2 | 5 |
| | Sub-total | 4.22±0.79 | 2 | 5 |
| Humility | 44. I love my school. | 3.87±1.01 | 1 | 5 |
| | 45. I love my country. | 4.22±0.88 | 1 | 5 |
| | 46. I believe peace in the world should be maintained | 4.43±.75 | 3 | 5 |
| | 47. For me, life as a community is as important as life as an individual. | 4.34±0.77 | 2 | 5 |
| | 48. When I have a problem that is in the spotlight around the world, I share my opinion with others about it. | 4.18±0.93 | 1 | 5 |
| | Sub-total | 4.21±0.70 | 2.6 | 5 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Total (Righteous Domain)** | 4.27±0.66 | 2.88 | 5 |
| **Behavioral Domain** | Competency (will) | 49. When something is decided, I go ahead as planned. | 4.14±0.86 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 50. I can express my opinion logically to others. | 4.16±.87 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 51. I am evaluated for acting with leadership. | 4.06±1.02 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 52. I prepare thoroughly for most things. | 4.20±0.90 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 53. I am willing to do the right thing. | 4.27±080 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 54. I put up with it even if it's hard to do the right thing. | 4.20±0.85 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 55. Regardless of profit or loss, if it's the right thing, you must take courage to act I do volunteer work continuously. | 4.12±0.87 | 1 | 5 |
| | | Sub-total | 4.17±0.75 | 2.29 | 5 |
| | Habit | 56. I do volunteer work continuously. | 3.87±1.04 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 57. I'm constantly trying to challenge new things. | 4.10±.99 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 58. I tend to actively participate in school activities (school events, clubs, etc.). | 3.90±1.03 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 59. I participate in social activities (campaigns, voting, etc.). | 3.99±1.00 | 1 | 5 |
| | | 60. I once donated to help people in difficult conditions (such as flood victims, disadvantaged people, international hunger, etc.). | 3.88±1.14 | 1 | 5 |
| | | Sub-total | 3.95±0.87 | 1.20 | 5 |
| | | **Total (Behavioral Domain)** | 4.08±0.77 | 1.83 | 5 |

The freshmen participants showed a relatively high level of characteristic competency, ranking an overall average of 4.21 out of 5. More detailed results revealed scores of 4.27 for the 'righteous domain,' 4.22 for the 'cognitive domain,' and 4.08 for the 'behavioral domain.' Notably, the 'cognitive domain' indicates 'knowing,' the 'righteous domain' indicates 'feeling,' and the 'behavioral domain' indicates 'practice.' It suggests that students at C University exhibit a deficit in practical application.

Within the 'behavioral domain,' the sub-factor of 'habit' received the lowest score (3.95). Since habit formation is closely linked to the repetitive acts of proper behaviors, this outcome may imply a potential room for student improvement. In addition, Item 46 (i.e., "I believe peace in the world should be maintained,") from the sub-factor of 'humility' in the 'righteous domain,' ranked the highest score (4.43). This may signify the strong endorsement for world peace among the freshmen participants', indicating an openness to global harmony.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The present study attempted to evaluate the level of characteristic competency among freshmen at C University, with the objective of promoting these competencies. The goal was to develop a comprehensive

plan for liberal arts subjects and extracurricular programs within the institute based on the results. The average level of characteristic competency among the freshman participants was 4.21 out of 5. As per a closer examination by domain, the 'righteous domain' scored the highest, whereas the 'behavioral domain' ranked the lowest.

The results of the study imply that educational programs designed to foster students' characteristic competency need to prioritize the behavioral domain, particularly focusing on students' competency (will) and habit-based contents. Competency (will) refers to an individual's internal drive to achieve certain goals, and this determination is necessary to endorse an action. Habit denotes a repeated pattern of behaviors, inherently tied to the will; hence, will and habit are closely intertwined. To effectively attain these objectives, it is demanded for students to engage directly in practicing (e.g., hands-on activities) relevant characteristic competencies, rather than superficially learning about them at a book level.

In light of these findings, when developing a program aimed at promoting the characteristic competencies among freshmen at C University, it would be essential to encourage them to actively plan their own extracurricular activities as early as the implementation stage. Such opportunities would enable students to challenge themselves by creating programs that are aligned with their perceived desires. Through such iterative process, participation of the students is likely to become habitual, while the institute bears the responsibility of maintaining the level of students' will over time.

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