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# Beyond Grades: Exploring the Link Between Ethical Values and Academic Achievement

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the integration of ethical values into higher education has gained substantial recognition. This study investigated the relationship between ethical values and academic achievement among university students, focusing on six core dimensions: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Data were collected using self-assessment and peer-assessment instruments and analyzed through a quantitative survey design. Descriptive statistics revealed a moderate to high prevalence of ethical values from both self-perceived and peer-reported perspectives. Independent samples t-test results indicated significant differences between self and peer assessments for trustworthiness, respect, and responsibility, while no significant differences emerged for fairness, caring, and citizenship. Regression analysis further identified responsibility and caring as significant predictors of academic achievement. These findings underscore the pivotal role of students' ethical self-concept—particularly in terms of responsibility and empathy—in fostering academic success. The study recommends embedding character education into higher education curricula and adopting pedagogical frameworks that promote both cognitive excellence and ethical development.

**Key Words:** Ethical Values, Academic Achievement, Higher Education Students, Moral Development, Value Education, Predictors of Achievement

## Introduction

The educational sphere has seen a growing acceptance of the implementation of ethical values in recent years, primarily within higher education institutions. Every nation requires an increasing number of practitioners to understand how to manage the ethical complexities by considering the human and social aspects of various situations (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2021). The development of character through honesty, along with responsibility, respect, and fairness, creates both personal growth and academic behavioral patterns in students. The exploration of ethical values' connection to academic success has become essential because educational institutions now prioritize the development of students with moral responsibility. Moreover, academic ethical conduct includes more than just staying clear of rule violations since it requires persistent dedication and self-control alongside internal drive, which can lead to academic success.

Every individual has a set of principles, a code of conduct according to which they choose to live their life. These principles are also known as Ethical Values. According to Brown et al. (2023), ethical values are defined as the fundamental values that form individual norms and actions and that become visible in empirical ethics. In addition, ethical values are the directive measures for our choices, our preferences, and ultimately materialize either in the forging of our personality or in our decision-making (Ramadhani et al., 2024). In this manner, ethical values are those sets of principles and doctrines through which a person chooses to become either a scholar or a saint.

According to the Show-me-Character program presented in 1992, there are six core ethical values. These were phrased in the Aspen Declaration, where an independent, unbiased, nonsectarian group of youth development experts in 1992 recognized them as “core ethical values that transcend cultural, religious, and socioeconomic differences”.

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These values are famously known as the six pillars of character. The six pillars are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Furthermore, educators and researchers recognize core ethical values such as trustworthiness and respect alongside responsibility as essential components that promote both character development and academic achievement. Trustworthiness, which encompasses honesty, reliability, and academic integrity, is directly associated with disciplined learning habits and reduced misconduct.

In addition, Durlak and Mahoney (2022) have observed students who displayed strong personal and collective responsibility, which aligns with trustworthiness, achieved better academic results. Respect, which includes courteous interaction and recognition of diverse viewpoints as well as positive relationships with peers and teachers, creates a supportive classroom atmosphere. Research demonstrates that supportive learning environments lead to increased student motivation, which results in improved academic achievement (Eisenberg et al., 2020). The ethical value of responsibility, along with accountability and self-regulated learning, helps build ethical triangles and leads to better grades according to Prashar et al., (2024).

Furthermore, the research conducted by Allari et al. (2020) proved that nursing students who experienced caring relationships with their teachers developed stronger self-confidence, which serves as a proven academic achievement predictor. The practice of citizenship, which involves active participation in community life, strongly correlates with academic development. Research meta-analyses reveal that students who participate in civic engagement and service learning at higher education institutions show better learning outcomes, retention rates, and GPA results, according to Zhang and Zeng (2024). The combination of these values exists as moral virtues that simultaneously serve as drivers that boost academic achievement.

In the same context, the study by Su et al. (2024) illustrates the relationship between ethical principles and academic performance, while Wabiser and Irianto (2024) focuses on how motivating learners to engage with the content of the lesson hinges on maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere. The studies show that the development of ethical and moral character aids in fostering the achievement of academic objectives in addition to constructive classroom interactions and motivates students to engage positively in lessons. This study seeks to understand how ethical values affect academic achievement using a theoretical framework alongside survey-based empirical data. Contributing to these foundational values are fairness, caring, and citizenship, which expand the ethical-academic nexus beyond personal behaviors to relationship dynamics and civic involvement.

Moreover, the connection between ethical values and academic success in higher education has not received sufficient research despite rising global attention to value-based education. The majority of current studies concentrate on high school learners and study ethical conduct mainly through the perspective of academic rule violations. Research should redirect its attention to study ethical values as beneficial predictors of academic success among undergraduate and postgraduate students. This research aims to bridge the gap by investigating whether ethical values serve as significant predictors for academic success in higher education institutions. The study results will help educators, together with curriculum designers and policymakers, to create educational programs that develop both moral values and academic achievement.

### Research Objectives

1. To examine the prevalence of ethical values—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—among higher education students through self-assessment and peer-assessment.
2. To analyze the differences between self-perceived and peer-reported ethical values among higher education students.
3. To determine the extent to which specific ethical values predict academic achievement in higher education students.

### Literature Review

Empirical research shows that students' ethical orientations affect their learning results. Research by Pavlova (2021) demonstrated that students with high prosocial values showed lower academic dishonesty while maintaining higher



internal motivation. The internal drive led students to demonstrate authentic academic involvement, which produced improved academic results. The research indicates that ethical principles function to prevent detrimental academic behaviors while simultaneously creating environments that support academic achievement. Academic environments benefit from ethical values because they function as both defensive and developmental elements (Darkwa & Darkoh, 2023)

Significantly, core values of ethics—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—are becoming increasingly recognized as strong predictors of college and university student success. Researchers have discovered that students who demonstrate trustworthiness and responsibility develop established study habits, maintain academic integrity, and develop positive relationships with peers and instructors (Calabor et al., 2025). These characteristics produce classrooms in which honest questioning is nourished, collaborative assignments flourish, and cheating is less common. Fairness and respect, in their turn, guarantee that all voices are heard, encouraging students to take part actively and to support each other (Iloka, 2025).

Furthermore, Wang et al, (2025) perceive learners' motivation to succeed and their actual performance rise when they feel that their environment is fair and respectful. The impact of caring and citizenship on scholarly attainment is also mounting evidence. Moreover, students who are concerned—being empathetic, sharing their resources, and working together—are likely to construct robust, supportive peer networks, which in their turn reinforce their academic achievement. Active citizenship, involving involvement in both academic and wider campus life, has been associated with increased levels of persistence and overall academic achievement. Similarly, fairness, characterized by just and unbiased interactions within the class, nurtures students' trust and fosters inclusion, which sustains and enhances focus and collaboration (Nucci & Narvaez, 2022). Caring, defined by feelings of empathy, grants emotional support, especially when shown by teachers, and boosts learners' academic self-efficacy.

In addition, students who are involved in campus life and who engage in ethical behavior possess a greater sense of belonging, and this will have positive impacts on persistence and academic attainment. Empirical data also verify the relationship between moral character dispositions and scholastic achievement. For example, a study conducted by Erduran Tekin (2024) validated that high-scoring students in ethical thinking and responsibility also evidenced higher GPAs. Similarly, Icka and Kochoska (2024) indicated that moral character strengths such as fairness and respect are responsible for cognitive engagement and critical thinking abilities. These results culminate in the conclusion that ethical education integrated into the curriculum of higher education can not only improve moral development but also enhance academic performance.

## Methodology

This research used a quantitative descriptive design with triangulation strategy, gathering data from university students and their friends to determine the degree to which values of ethics become a part of personality. The population included social science students from three universities in the province of Punjab, Pakistan: University of the Punjab (Lahore), Bahauddin Zakariya University (Multan), and The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. Department-wise and gender-wise stratified sampling was undertaken, followed by cluster sampling to choose randomly selected groups of students. The sample itself comprised 1,000 students altogether. A researcher-developed questionnaire was used in data collection that was constructed based on expert advice and from the "Show-Me Character" model, consisting of six pillars: Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship. The questionnaire was split into two sections: demographic information and 60 items with 5-point Likert rating, with self- and peer-perceived answers. The questionnaire was completed directly with universities. 1,060 questionnaires were distributed, and 1,000 valid returns were obtained, paired and unpaired returns included. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with academics, and recording and notes (subject to agreement) were used for record purposes. The instrument was validated by expert review and revision. Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure reliability and obtained scores were of 0.855 (self-report) and 0.857 (peer-report), which signify good internal consistency.

## Results and Findings

Data analysis was performed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Data collected from the participants was analyzed using SPSS version 25 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed to examine the prevalence of six ethical value dimensions—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—from both self-assessment and peer-assessment perspectives. Independent-samples t-tests were employed to identify significant differences between self and peer evaluations for each dimension. Furthermore, regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which these ethical values predicted academic achievement.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Self-Perceived Ethical Values Among Students*

Sr. No.	Theme	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
1	Trustworthiness	3.7	4.0	5.0	1.2
2	Respect	3.0	3.5	5.0	1.3
3	Responsibility	3.9	4.0	5.0	1.1
4	Fairness	3.7	4.0	5.0	1.2
5	Caring	3.8	4.0	5.0	1.1
6	Citizenship	3.5	4.0	5.0	1.3
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>1.2</b>

Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis of students' ethical values as perceived by themselves. The six core themes evaluated include Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship. The overall mean of 3.65 indicates that university students perceive their ethical values to be moderately high. Supporting this further are the median and mode values of 4.0 and 5.0 respectively which indicate that most students rated their ethical values positively. Alongside this, a standard deviation of 1.2 reflects students' responses were somewhat diverse yet, the perception of ethical character was largely uniform.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics of Peer-Perceived Ethical Values of Students*

Sr. No.	Theme	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
1	Trustworthiness	3.6	4.0	5.0	1.2
2	Respect	3.2	3.5	5.0	1.3
3	Responsibility	3.9	4.0	5.0	1.1
4	Fairness	3.7	4.0	5.0	1.2
5	Caring	3.8	4.0	5.0	1.1
6	Citizenship	3.5	4.0	5.0	1.3
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.60</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>1.2</b>

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics of the ethical values of students as perceived by their peers, using the same six character themes. The overall mean of 3.6 shows that university students have a moderate level of perception that their ethical values are high. This is also corroborated by the median and mode of 4.0 and 5.0 respectively, which indicates that most students gave their ethical values high ratings. Moreover, a standard deviation of 1.2 implies that though there were variations in responses, perception of ethical character was generally uniform.

**Table 3**

*Comparative Analysis of Self and Peer Perceptions*

Theme	Group	Mean	df	T	Sig. (p-value)
Trustworthiness	Self	36.80	1998	3.039	.002
	Peer	36.06			
Respect	Self	32.98	1998	2.125	.034
	Peer	32.46			
Responsibility	Self	39.32	1998	1.980	.048
	Peer	38.74			
Fairness	Self	37.33	1998	1.676	.094
	Peer	36.91			
Caring	Self	38.16	1998	-0.418	.676
	Peer	38.27			
Citizenship	Self	35.30	1998	1.392	.164
	Peer	34.94			
<b>Overall</b>	Self	219.89	1998	2.381	<b>.017</b>
	Peer	217.38			

Table 3 shows comparative analysis of self and peer perceptions. A t-test was applied. Significant differences were observed in trustworthiness ( $p = .002$ ), respect ( $p = .034$ ), responsibility ( $p = .048$ ), and overall ethical values ( $p = .017$ ), with students consistently rating themselves higher than their peers did. These findings imply a self-enhancement bias or possible limitations in peer observation. On the other hand, fairness, caring, and citizenship did not show statistically significant differences ( $p > .05$ ), suggesting consistency between self and peer perceptions in these domains.

**Table 4**

*Ethical Values as Predictors of Student's Academic Achievement*

$R^2 = 0.10$	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Beta	Beta		
(Constant)	1.818	5.168		.352	.725
Trustworthiness	-.148	.118	-0.48	-1.246	.213
Respect	-.026	.109	-0.10	-.236	.814
Responsibility	.285	.117	.089	2.446	.015
Fairness	-.178	.127	-.059	-1.407	.160
Caring	.235	.117	.077	2.004	.045
Citizenship	.018	.116	.006	.154	.878
Ethics	.235	.117	.326	2.004	.045

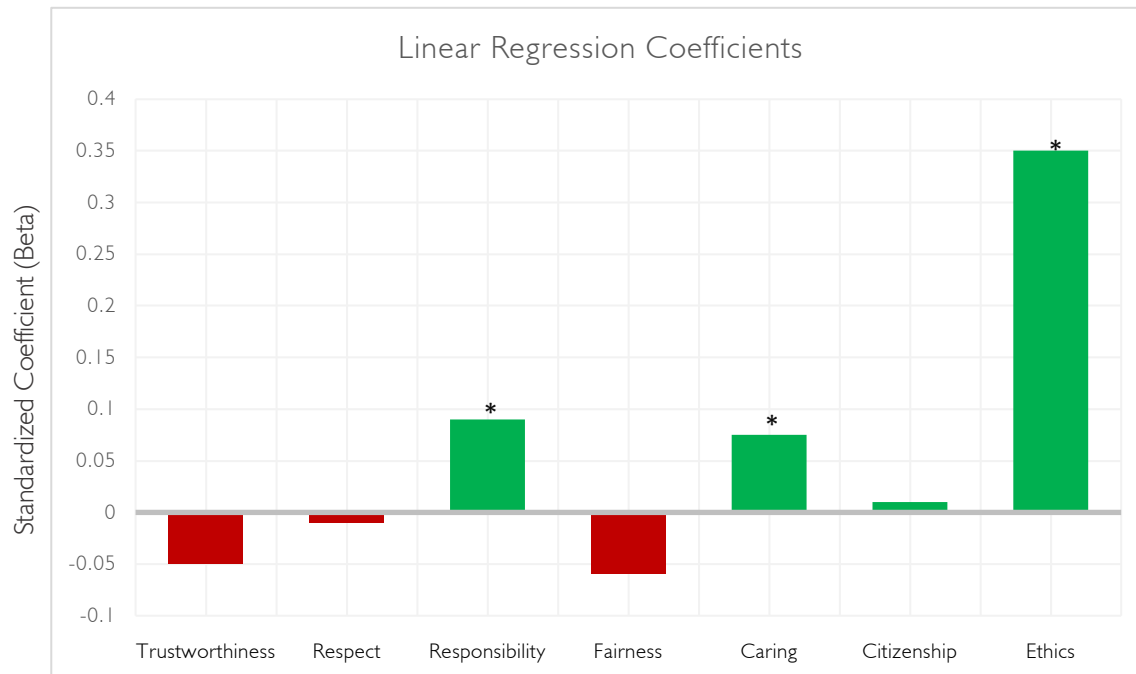
Table 4 indicates the relationship between Ethical values and Student's Academic Achievement. In order to understand the association between ethical values and students' academic achievement, a linear regression analysis was applied. The ethical parameters of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, citizenship, and ethics overall formed the independent variables of the model alongside academic achievement as the dependent variable. The table indicates that  $R^2 = 0.10$ , therefore, 10% of the variance in students' academic achievement is attributed to these ethical values. As for the individual predictors, the value of the standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and the p value evaluate dimensions of ethics that most strongly define academic achievement. A positive value for responsibility ( $\beta = 0.89$ ,  $p = 0.15$ ) indicates that the responsibility dimension of ethics acts as a predictor which means students who exhibit responsibility are likely to achieve academically as stated in literature where self-discipline and responsibility are mentioned as strong academic success predictors.

In the same way, Overall Ethics ( $\beta = 0.326$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ) and Caring ( $\beta = 0.077$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ) were also found to be significant predictors of academic achievement. The findings suggest that students who are empathetic and possess ethical awareness can cultivate positive relationships with peers and teachers which, in turn, promotes the overall learning experience and academic engagement.

On the contrary, the variables trustworthiness ( $\beta = -.048$ ,  $p = .213$ ), respect ( $\beta = -.010$ ,  $p = .814$ ), fairness ( $\beta = -.059$ ,  $p = .160$ ), and citizenship ( $\beta = .006$ ,  $p = .878$ ) are not significant predictors in this model. While these values are likely to be important in the context of holistic character development, in this study, they did not autonomously predict academic performance.

### Graph 1

*Standardized Beta Coefficients of Ethical Values Predicting Academic Achievement*



To conclude, as shown in the graph above the regression analysis indicates that of the ethical values selected, responsibility and caring, alongside a broad commitment to ethics, are significant predictors of academic achievement. It reinforces the need to foster personal responsibility and empathy through character education initiatives in higher education.

### Discussion

The current analysis of the situation indicated that out of the six ethical values evaluated in the study, responsibility, caring, and overall ethical orientation have a significant association with academic achievement. These results illustrate the significant influence of personal values in academic contexts. Responsibility, as an ethical value, is a form of self-discipline, hard work, and responsibility. These are attributes that have been linked to academic success (Su et al., 2024). In the same vein, the caring value resonates with the emotional and social learning theory which posits that empathy and social support are strong motivators for engagement (Allari et al., 2020).

On the other hand, trustworthiness, respect, fairness, and citizenship do not have a considerable impact on academic outcomes, which means that while these values are significantly important in building ethical learning environments, their effect is likely to be indirect, possibly mediated by factors such as dominant culture of the institution or peer influence. For example, fairness and respect are important values that enhance collaboration and shared understanding, but these do not correlate to immediate measurable academic performance outcomes. This refinement

echoes findings in educational scholarship that distinguish between behavior and performance (Talloires Declaration, 2021).

These results add to the growing literature that integrates character education with academic learning. The study emphasizes that promoting ethical responsibility and caring is likely to aid academic achievement, especially in the later stages of education where independence and social maturity are important. Nevertheless, the modest explanatory power of ethics (10%) indicates that ethical values are likely to correlate with a wider range of cognitive, emotional, and contextual mechanisms (MacCann et al., 2020). Those mechanisms of influence and causation need to be further illuminated through longitudinal and mixed-method approaches.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to analyze the ethical values of university students in relation to their academic achievement, using self-perceived character traits of trust, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. From the results, responsibility and caring, together with ethical orientation, appeared to be strong predictors of academic achievement. Supporting the view that ethical and character development is not ancillary to but essential in educational achievement in higher education. While trustworthiness, fairness, and respect are essential for a positive academic climate, their lack of significant predictive value for academic performance underscores the intricacies of ethics and behavior. As a whole, the results stress the importance of more deeply embedding ethics and character education into the university curriculum to foster moral development alongside academic achievement.

## Recommendations

From the findings, it is suggested that character education be firmly embedded into the curriculum and extracted learning opportunities of the university. Focus should be placed on the development of responsibility and caring, two values that were found to strongly impact achievement. Faculty should be trained to model ethical behavior, advocate for socially and emotionally rich classroom environments, and incorporate value-based mentoring into academic advising and development programs. Educators should be encouraged to balance learning outcomes with ethics, values, and emotions to alleviate the neglect of character education and ethics. Further, it is suggested that the mediating variables and longitudinal implications of ethical values on academic achievement be pursued.



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