Pre-Work Activity for Educators

Note: The following is an optional thought activity to help you better understand why BRI designs around vices and virtues. You can complete as much of it as you need to better explain vices and virtues to your students.

☐ I can identify the civic virtues and discuss their importance to civics education.

☐ I can apply Aristotle’s definition of a “golden mean” to differentiate between virtue and vice.

☐ I can describe why these civic virtues are important to self-governance and creating a healthy civil society.

Directions: Read the following information on content and context of the Heroes & Villains resource. Reflect and answer the questions that follow each section.

Civic Virtues and Vices

Below are the civic virtues and their vices used in Heroes & Villains. Take time to read through each virtue, vice, and the definitions.

Virtues

Courage: The ability to take constructive action in the face of fear or danger. To stand firm as a person of character and do what is right, especially when it is unpopular or puts one at risk.

Honor: Demonstrating good character and being trustworthy.

Humility: A recognition that one’s ignorance is far greater than one’s knowledge. Putting others ahead of ourselves in thought, word, and deed. A willingness to give others credit and to admit when we are wrong.

Integrity: To tell the truth, expose untruths, and keep one’s promises.

Justice: Upholding of what is fair and right. Respecting the rights and dignity of all.

Moderation: The avoidance of excess or extremes.
Prudence: Practical wisdom that applies reason and other virtues to discern right courses of action in specific situations.

Respect: Regard for and defending the equal rights and inherent dignity of all human beings, including oneself.

Responsibility: Acting on good judgment about what is right or wrong even when it is not popular. Individuals must take care of themselves, their families, and their fellow citizens/others in civil society and a republic and be vigilant to preserve their own liberty and the liberty of others.

Vices

Cowardice: Failing to take constructive action in the face of fear or danger. A lack of firmness or conviction.

Contempt: Showing disregard, disdain, or lack of consideration for someone or something worthy of action or admiration.

Immoderation (Extremism): Acting in excess or to an extreme. Lacking restraint.

Dishonor: Failing to demonstrate good character, integrity, and acting deceptively.

Self-Deception: Acting on a belief that a false idea or situation is true. Being deluded or deceived by ideas that endanger the humanity of others and movements that are unjust.

Injustice: To harm others by applying unequal rules and damaging another’s inalienable rights and dignity.

Hubris: To have excessive pride, vanity, and arrogance that usually leads to a tragic fall.

Imprudence: Acting without care or thoughtfulness for consequences. Exercising lack of wisdom appropriate to situations.

Irresponsibility: Acting on poor judgment or failing the trust others place in you.

1. After reviewing the list of virtues and vices, pick one of each. Describe a prior experience when you acted or observed the virtue. Then, describe another time when you acted or observed your chosen vice. How did your actions affect yourself and others?
2. Which of the civic virtues do you want your students to know and practice? Why do you think this virtue is important to their development as a student and as an engaged citizen?

Aristotle’s “Golden Mean”

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, understood virtue as a “mean” (or middle) between two extremes. The same character trait, when expressed to the extreme, ceases to be virtue and becomes vice. For example, too little courage is cowardice, while too much makes one foolhardy. A healthy respect for authority becomes blind obedience to power when expressed too strongly, or it descends into unprincipled recalcitrance when completely lacking.

Aristotle also believed virtue is a habit. Individuals choose to practice virtue or vice in particular circumstances. Over time, those choices become habits and become ingrained in character. The virtuous person thus becomes self-governing over their passions. Virtuous behavior is not the result of numerous, individual self-serving calculations about which course of action would be most advantageous. For example, a person who finds a piece of jewelry, intends to keep it, but later returns it to the owner to collect a reward helps bring about a just outcome (property was returned to its rightful owner); however, he falls short of the title “virtuous” because of the calculation he went through to arrive at his course of action. While all virtues must be habits, not all habits are virtuous.

3. Identify a virtue and its related vice you want to explore. Describe how this virtue can become a vice. Provide an example from your own life.
In Pursuit of a Healthy Civil Society

Drawn from examining human nature, these virtues shape the American republic with ordered liberty and help form the nation’s conscience. Together, the virtues bind a diverse, self-governing people together in communities and promote a healthy civil society. The continuation of the American experiment in self-government requires we know and practice these virtues.

The maintenance of our republican government requires the people to be vigilant, informed, and virtuous, ensuring that governing institutions are directed towards their right ends. Good habits of virtue promote self-government and help guarantee communities orient themselves towards advancing the spirit of a common purpose.

The Founders established a republic with representative self-government based upon the consent of the governed and constitutional protections of liberty. This means the people are the ultimate authority and create a government with representatives chosen by them to govern. The Founders believed a self-governing people needed to practice civic virtues in order for a republican government and society to endure. Civic virtues bind free individuals into a community that is united by the spirit of a common purpose and an interest in the common good.

4. Why are these civic virtues important to self-governance and creating a healthy civil society?