

# THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT

Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University

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*Are the ethics of yesteryear relevant today?  
Will they be relevant tomorrow?*

THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT is an initiative dedicated to the yet unnamed generations who will occupy, toil amongst, and lead this experiment called America in the years ahead. What can they learn from us, the living generations? What can, or have, we learned from one another? And what do we really know about our American moral fiber?

Housed at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT is a nationwide initiative designed to facilitate substantive, public deliberation on ethics and leadership. The initiative was born with the simple aims of affirming and cultivating a demand for ethical leadership, as well as placing ethics at the forefront of public and private discourse. Igniting dialogue across America, THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT has provided public spaces for citizens to test ideas and learn from one another, while exploring contemporary ethical challenges. The original and continuing mission remains: to foster dialogue, encourage teaching, and communicate ideas on matters of ethics.

Since 1999, thousands of Americans have participated in public meetings about ethical leadership hosted by THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT in cities nationwide — in places such as Atlanta, Boston, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. They have added their voices to this important national conversation.

**Come lend your voice.** If it is true, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, that each age must write its own books, then how will others read and perceive our books? This is, and has been, a guiding question for THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT. It is a meaningful question for all of us.

“To the Not-Yet-Born American Generations:” ©

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In June 2002, one hundred civic leaders from across America came together at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, for THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT’s National Conversation on Generational Ethics. Together, they explored the values and virtues, as well as forms of moral leadership, which each living generation brings to the challenges facing American society. In concluding their intergenerational dialogue, they reflected on what they wanted to convey to future American generations. We ask you to do the same. What would you want future American generations to know about the unique contributions of their predecessors? What core principles, values, and ideals would you ask them to honor, respect, and practice? Use the exercise below in your classroom, workplace, church, or living room. You will, no doubt, be inspired by the responses.

Please send us your own letter or the letter(s) composed by your students, co-workers, family, and fellow citizens to the following address:

THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT  
Kenan Institute for Ethics  
Duke University, Box 90432  
Durham, NC 27708

**Write a letter to the next American generation**, expressing your hopes for the content of their character. Identify the values you would most want to pass on. If you write as a group, here are some instructions to follow.

1. Set aside 5 minutes for personal reflection and have each group member write down at least 2 ideas to be considered.
2. Briefly allow each person to discuss his or her ideas.
3. Allocate 5–10 minutes for each person to draft sentences that he or she wants to be included in your letter.
4. Together, try to string your sentences into a single letter, and then edit.
5. Have everyone sign your joint letter.

Sample letters written by some of those who attended THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER PROJECT’s National Conversation on Generational Ethics at Duke University are available on-line at [www.contentofourcharacter.org](http://www.contentofourcharacter.org).