

## Ellen Klitgaard Essay-Integrity: The Foundation

"A general dissolution of principles and manners will more surely overthrow the liberties of America than the whole force of the common enemy. While the people are virtuous they cannot be subdued; but when once they lose their virtue then will be ready to surrender their liberties to the first external or internal invader." In this letter written by Samuel Adams in 1779, it seems as though this founding father has accurately predicted a fatal epidemic that has been sweeping the United States: a lack of integrity. While the news is bombarded with stories of violent hate crimes, corrupt men of power, and trashy celebrities, few seem to realize the root of the larger problem at hand. The true tragedy is not any individual mistake or incident, but the disbandment of integrity in our country. I believe this is most evident and perhaps most harmful in the political arena, the headquarters of American leadership.

Before integrity can be questioned, we must first define it. Integrity is more than "doing what you're supposed to do." Integrity is a character trait comprised of the virtues of respect, trust, morals, ethics, honesty, responsibility, and justice. The government is **responsible** for making **moral** decisions, **honestly** serving **justice** in an **ethical** manner, and therefore is a place where **integrity** is essential. Today, many people in our country do not have faith in the government-and often rightfully so. Many politicians simply push their own agendas, strive for re-election, and fail to do what is best for the people. How can our country's political system successfully operate? It is not a matter of political parties in control, but an issue of unity. The people must trust their leaders, and the leaders must be trustworthy. To be trustworthy, a leader displays integrity by consciously putting virtues of honesty and responsibility into practice. Before our country can see a significant and positive change, we must elect leaders who value integrity and put its virtues into action. I strive to be this kind of leader as Student Body President, inspiring those around me to make responsible choices, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

This fall, my community suffered the tragedy of losing one of its high school students to alcohol poisoning, a rarity in our small community. I had recently attended the National Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) conference in Orlando, Florida, and was already motivated to spread awareness about the negative impact of destructive decisions like drug and alcohol abuse. In the wake of the tragic event, a local news network cast our high school in a negative light, interviewing poor sources, stating that there were no programs in our community committed to encouraging students to avoid alcohol, and suggesting that the community as a whole was lacking character. Though it would have been very easy to become angered at the remarks but do nothing about it, I rallied the student body and led a school-wide assembly where students could discuss their views concerning drug and alcohol use in the community. Our students also wrote to the network with respect and honesty, taking responsibility for the actions of our lost student, but also explaining that there were indeed grounded students and positive efforts in place in our community. A different news network came to report the students' side of the story, where I explained the positive programs in place to encourage moral decision-making. We then hosted an alcohol-free dance in honor of our classmate. As a student body, we turned a saddening, unfortunate event into a positive experience. In a challenging situation that

evoked great emotion, I made it my responsibility as the student government leader to respectfully and honestly share the truth.

The display of integrity by my fellow students, school, and community during a difficult situation made me extremely proud. As long as I can remember, my parents have instilled in me the importance of keeping a good name. As one of my most prized possessions, a respectable reputation is also the most difficult to hold on to. It is irreplaceable and easily tarnished. Because of this, I do not believe in "small decisions." How I choose to spend my time for "just one fun Friday night" is as large of an investment as the decision to buy a home for a lifetime. The investment I have made in my reputation while in high school has not been an easy one, and it has demanded sacrifices. However, the conscious choice to practice integrity in my everyday actions has been the foundation for developing my character, which will guide my actions for the rest of my life.