

Confronting Moral Injury in Higher Education and Engineering Education: Using Situational Judgments to Reform Institutional Character

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ABSTRACT - This evidence-based practice paper investigates how moral injury manifests in engineering education and higher education more broadly through real-world situational judgment scenarios drawn from academic governance, curriculum design, evaluation processes, resource allocation, and responses to ethical dissent. Institutions of higher education routinely present themselves as moral exemplars—committed to truth, justice, inclusion, and human flourishing. Yet growing evidence suggests that these same institutions can unintentionally inflict moral injury on students, faculty, and academic leaders when institutional practices conflict with deeply held ethical commitments. Moral injury, widely studied in military and healthcare contexts, refers to the psychological, relational, and moral harm that occurs when individuals are required to act against their values, witness wrongdoing by authority, or experience betrayal by institutions that claim moral authority. Despite its relevance, moral injury remains underexamined in higher education. Grounded in Mary Crossan’s Leader Character framework, the study reframes moral injury as a consequence of fragmented institutional character—particularly deficiencies in justice, accountability, courage, humanity, and judgment—rather than individual failure or misconduct. Using a qualitative, interpretive design informed by an emic perspective, data sources include archival institutional documents and systematically reflected lived and observed experiences within academic leadership contexts. Findings reveal that moral injury in higher education often arises from routine, normalized practices: selective enforcement of standards, procedural opacity, misalignment between authority and responsibility, and the privileging of faculty or institutional convenience over student learning and ethical integrity. Situational judgment scenarios make visible how moral injury is produced, normalized, or mitigated through institutional responses to everyday decisions. This work contributes a novel conceptual and methodological approach for examining ethics in higher education, moving beyond compliance-based models toward character-centered institutional analysis. The findings underscore that higher education cannot effectively educate for ethical leadership or societal flourishing while tolerating systems that punish moral courage and integrity. Addressing moral injury requires not greater individual resilience, but deliberate cultivation of institutional character aligned with higher education’s moral purpose.

Keywords: moral injury, engineering ethics, higher education, situational judgment, moral resilience, character education

I. INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education occupy a privileged moral position in society. They are entrusted with advancing knowledge, cultivating ethical judgment, preparing professionals, and contributing to the public good. Universities routinely describe themselves as moral exemplars—sites of truth-seeking, justice, inclusion, and human flourishing. Faculty, staff, and administrators are not merely employees within these institutions; they are moral agents whose work is animated by commitments to integrity, intellectual honesty, fairness, and service to others. Yet despite these aspirations, higher education has been largely exempt from sustained moral scrutiny of its own internal practices. This paper argues that higher education is not immune to moral failure—and, in fact, may be uniquely susceptible to **moral injury**.

Originally developed in the context of military service and healthcare, *moral injury* describes the profound psychological, relational, and spiritual harm that occurs when individuals are forced to act against their deeply held moral beliefs, witness wrongdoing by authority figures, or are betrayed by institutions that claim moral authority yet fail to uphold ethical standards (Shay, 2014; Jinkerson, 2016; Griffin et al., 2019; Cartolovni et al., 2021). Moral injury is not reducible to stress, burnout, or interpersonal conflict. It arises when there is a rupture between what individuals believe is right and what institutions require, permit, or punish. While moral injury has been widely studied in professions characterized by life-and-death decision-making, its relevance to higher education has received remarkably little attention (Imad, 2026; Reynolds, 2025; Entringer, 2025; Hanna et al., 2023). Universities are environments of intense power asymmetry, opaque decision-making, reputational risk, and moral rhetoric. They frequently demand ethical labor—care for students, commitment to equity, adherence to professional standards—while offering limited protection to those who raise concerns about injustice, misuse of power, or violations of stated values. When faculty or academic leaders act in alignment with institutional missions—by advocating for fairness, transparency, or ethical governance—they may find themselves disciplined, marginalized, or silenced rather than supported.

Moral injury in higher education occurs when faculty, staff, students, or leaders are asked to participate in, witness, or remain silent about practices that betray the moral purposes of education: truth-seeking, care, justice, student flourishing, intellectual formation, and institutional integrity. It is not simply individual fragility or burnout; it points to broken systems that require moral repair. Some examples of moral injury in higher education include the following:

1. Faculty forced to enforce harmful rules: A professor denies a late submission or registration exception for a student facing serious hardship because institutional policy allows no discretion, even though the professor believes the decision harms the student (Reynolds, 2025).

2. Administrative compliance displacing educational purpose: Faculty spend excessive time on rankings, assessment paperwork, or bureaucratic reporting that feels disconnected from teaching, mentoring, and student formation (Reynolds, 2025).
3. Institutional betrayal after student harm: A student reports sexual violence, but the institution fails to produce meaningful accountability; the harmed student leaves while the accused student graduates (Reynolds, 2025).
4. Witnessing force against students: Faculty observe police or security responses to student protest and feel anger, helplessness, shame, or loss of trust in the institution (Reynolds, 2025).
5. Teaching amid structural inequity: Faculty teach online or continue a course knowing some students lack access, food, funding, transportation, or technology, and feel complicit in reproducing inequality (Reynolds, 2025).
6. Pressure to pass or retain students: Faculty assign grades they believe are undeserved because of institutional, enrollment, retention, or relational pressures, creating shame and moral dissonance (Imad, 2026).
7. Silencing and fear around academic freedom: Faculty remain silent when institutional decisions violate professed values because dissent feels risky, leading to shame, withdrawal, and erosion of agency (Imad, 2026).

Investigating moral injury in higher education is therefore not an exercise in individual grievance, but a necessary inquiry into **institutional moral character**. When ethical action is punished and moral courage is reframed as disloyalty, institutions inflict harm not only on individuals, but on the educational mission itself. Faculty and administrators experiencing moral injury often report loss of trust, erosion of professional identity, diminished sense of purpose, and withdrawal from leadership or innovation (Reynolds, 2025; O'Brien and Lynch, 2025; Cahill et al., 2023). Over time, such injuries degrade institutional culture, normalize ethical compromise, and undermine the very ideals universities claim to uphold.

The consequences of moral injury in higher education extend beyond campus boundaries. Universities shape future professional, civic leaders, engineers, scientists, educators, and policymakers. If students are educated within institutions that tolerate injustice, suppress dissent, or prioritize self-protection over integrity, they implicitly learn that ethical principles are conditional rather than foundational. In this way, unresolved moral injury within higher education becomes a mechanism through which moral failure is reproduced in society. Some cited examples are offered herein. Hafferty and Franks (1994) argued that "most of the critical determinants of physician identity operate not within the formal curriculum but in a more subtle, less officially recognized 'hidden curriculum.'" Professional education should be seen as a form of moral training in which what the institution *does* shapes students more than what it *teaches*. Lehmann, Sulmasy, and Desai (2018) documented that more than half of 2016 medical school graduates reported experiencing disconnects between what they were taught about professional

behavior and what they saw being demonstrated by faculty. This demonstrates that learners receive conflicting messages about ethics and professionalism when the actions or words of role models are not consistent with the values espoused by the profession. Feister et al. (2014), in a mixed-methods study across four engineering programs, found that institutional climate shaped how students defined, prioritized, and resolved ethical problems and that different institutional orientations (entrepreneurialism vs. human-centered design) produced measurably different ethical reasoning patterns in students. In business education, Hanson and Moore (2014) examined the influence of a university's ethical system on undergraduate moral development and concluded that the institution's enacted values, not its stated ones, were the dominant moral influence. Chiang et al. (2013) similarly found, using data from 318 business students, that ethical climate was a significant predictor of ethical behavior, and that students with positive perceptions of their institution's ethical environment were more likely to avoid unethical conduct. Dalton (2006) argued explicitly that universities have unintentional and accidental moral influences alongside intentional ones, and that the challenge is to "expand the ways in which the moral influences of collegiate environments are intentional and to reduce the most negative unintentional or accidental influences." Thorp (2021) argues that the civic purpose of higher education is to "foster in the next generation of citizens a regard for individual freedoms and rights, principled debates, and tolerance for opposing opinions" and that administrators who suppress or play politics with that mission undermine it.

This paper seeks to make moral injury in higher education visible as there are implications for engineering education. Drawing on documented institutional interactions and anonymized scenarios, it examines how moral injury arises through governance processes, performance evaluation systems, whistleblower responses, and the selective enforcement of norms such as “collegiality” and “professionalism.” The analysis reframes these practices not as isolated administrative failures, but as moral phenomena—moments where institutions betray their stated commitments and harm those who act in good faith. By naming moral injury as a legitimate lens for understanding harm in higher education, this paper contributes to a growing call to move beyond compliance-based ethics toward character-centered institutional reform. If higher education is to fulfill its purpose of advancing humanity, it must first reckon with its own moral contradictions. Reforming structures, policies, and incentives without attending to moral injury risks perpetuating systems that appear ethical while quietly punishing those who embody ethics most fully. **In short, higher education cannot educate for moral leadership while failing to practice it. Investigating moral injury is a necessary step toward restoring integrity, trust, and moral credibility within the academy.**

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is grounded in Mary Crossan's Leader Character framework (Crossan et al., 2017; Crossan et al., 2023; Crossan et al., 2024; Crossan et al., 2025), which offers a robust lens for examining how moral injury arises not merely from individual wrongdoing, but from failures of character embedded within leadership systems and institutional cultures. *Leader character* as the integration of virtues, values, and ethical capacities that enable individuals and institutions to exercise sound judgment in complex, high-stakes contexts. Rather than treating ethics as rule compliance or isolated decision-making, the leader character framework emphasizes who leaders are, not merely what they do (Crossan et al., 2017). Leader character is composed of interdependent dimensions, commonly articulated as (Crossan et al., 2017):

- **Integrity** - honesty, consistency between values and actions,
- **Justice** - fairness, due process, equity,
- **Courage** - moral fortitude, willingness to act despite risk,
- **Humility** - self-awareness, openness to critique,
- **Temperance** - restraint, avoidance of excess or abuse of power,
- **Accountability** - owning decisions and their consequences,
- **Humanity** - care, empathy, respect for dignity,
- **Collaboration** - shared power, inclusion of diverse perspectives,
- **Judgment** - the integrating capacity that balances all dimensions in context.

Critically, judgment is not a standalone virtue but the orchestrating capacity that integrates the others in real-world situations characterized by ambiguity, power asymmetry, and competing values. These conditions are endemic in higher education. This paper positions moral injury as the predictable outcome of leader character breakdowns, particularly when institutions claim moral authority but act in ways that violate core character dimensions. From a leader character perspective, moral injury occurs when individuals are: (1) Required to compromise **integrity** to maintain standing, (2) Subjected to inconsistent or biased processes that violate **justice**, (3) Punished for exercising **courage** through truth-telling or ethical dissent, (4) Dismissed or devalued when demonstrating **humility** or raising concerns, (5) Harmed by leaders who lack **temperance** in their use of authority, (6) Left without recourse due to absent or performative **accountability**, (7) Treated instrumentally rather than humanely, eroding **humanity**, (8) Excluded from decision-making in ways that undermine **collaboration**, and (9) Harmed by poor or self-protective **judgment** masquerading as professionalism.

In such contexts, individuals experience not just organizational stress, but a deeper moral rupture: a violation of their identity as ethical professionals operating in an institution that claims to value ethics. Crossan's framework is particularly well-suited to higher education because universities often rely on: (1) vague standards (e.g., "excellence," "collegiality," "fit"), (2)

discretionary authority shielded as “academic judgment,” (3) decentralized governance with weak accountability loops, (4) moral language untethered from enforceable norms. These conditions make character, and not policy, the decisive factor in how power is exercised. Further, the leader character framework shifts analysis away from blaming “bad actors” and toward examining character systems: Who is rewarded? Whose voice is protected? When is courage celebrated versus punished? How consistently is justice applied? Whose humanity is centered when conflict arises? Moral injury emerges when institutions systematically answer these questions in ways that contradict their stated values. A central insight of leader character scholarship is that trust is a moral outcome. Trust is sustained when individuals observe coherence between institutional values, leadership behavior, and decision-making processes. Conversely, trust is destroyed when institutions: publicly espouse virtues they privately violate, use process as a shield rather than a safeguard, or prioritize reputational risk over moral responsibility. From this standpoint, moral injury can be understood as a form of institutional betrayal, enabled by deficits in leader character at multiple levels of governance. Individuals who act with integrity and courage become especially vulnerable because their moral clarity exposes institutional inconsistencies.

By anchoring the analysis of moral injury in Crossan’s leader character framework, this paper makes three theoretical contributions: (1) It reframes moral injury in higher education as a leadership and governance failure, not an interpersonal or performance issue. (2) It provides a vocabulary for naming invisible harms, especially those arising from selective enforcement of norms and misuses of discretion. (3) It establishes leader character as a necessary condition for institutional moral credibility, without which higher education cannot fulfill its societal purpose. In doing so, this framework supports the central claim of the paper: **Higher education cannot advance human flourishing while operating with fragmented or performative character. Moral injury is the signal that character alignment has failed—and that reform must begin not with policy alone, but with the moral development of institutions themselves.**

III. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in an emic perspective (Markee, 2013; Chapman and Kinloch, 2011; Spiers, 2000; Morris et al., 1999; Harris, 1976), defined as an insider’s account of lived experience and witnessed experiences within a particular institutional and professional context. An emic approach is particularly appropriate for investigating moral injury, which is often experienced as invisible, normalized, or institutionally obscured, and therefore difficult to capture through external observation alone. Rather than seeking generalizability in a positivist sense, this study aims to achieve theoretical and analytic transferability by illuminating patterns of moral harm that are structurally embedded within higher education institutions. The focus is not on adjudicating individual disputes or assigning

blame, but on understanding how moral injury emerges through institutional processes, leadership practices, and governance structures that are common across higher education.

The author occupies a dual role as both researcher and participant-observer, having served in senior academic leadership roles within higher education and having directly experienced, observed, and documented institutional practices of moral injury. This positionality provides access to forms of knowledge that are often unavailable to external researchers, including: (1) internal governance processes and informal decision-making, (2) leadership communications and performance evaluation practices, (3) the lived consequences of institutional responses to ethical dissent, (4) the moral reasoning and sensemaking of faculty and academic leaders navigating power asymmetries.

The emic perspective adopted in this study does not claim objectivity in the sense of detachment, but rather epistemic credibility rooted in proximity, duration, and accountability. Consistent with interpretive qualitative traditions, reflexivity is treated as a methodological strength rather than a limitation. The author engages in ongoing critical reflection to distinguish between personal experience and analytic interpretation, situating individual experiences within broader institutional patterns. Data for this study are drawn from: (1) **Archival Documents** - Archival materials include contemporaneous records generated over multiple years within higher education settings, such as: formal institutional communications (e.g., evaluations, memoranda, policy documents), governance records and procedural documentation, written responses, and policy statements. These documents were not created for the purposes of this study but were produced in the normal course of institutional operations, thereby providing a stable evidentiary basis for analysis. (2) **Lived and Observed Experiences** - The second data source consists of systematically reflected lived experiences, including: experiences directly encountered in leadership and faculty roles, observations of institutional treatment of others (students, faculty, and administration), witnessed interactions involving ethical conflict, retaliation, or procedural inconsistency, informal accounts shared by colleagues navigating similar institutional dynamics. These experiences are treated as data not in their raw or anecdotal form, but through analytic reconstruction, focusing on recurring patterns, institutional norms, and moral tensions.

Data analysis followed an iterative, abductive process informed by the leader character framework and theories of moral injury. Analysis proceeded through the following stages: (1) **Initial Pattern Identification** - Archival documents and experiential accounts were reviewed to identify recurring institutional practices associated with moral conflict, such as: shifting standards of evaluation, selective enforcement of policies, retaliatory responses to ethical concerns, discrepancies between institutional values and actions. (2) **Theoretical Coding** - Identified patterns were then examined through the lens of leader character dimensions (e.g., integrity, justice, courage, accountability, judgment), allowing moral injury to be conceptualized as a consequence of character misalignment rather than individual failure. (3) **Scenario**

Construction - To protect confidentiality and foreground structural dynamics, findings are presented as anonymized, composite scenarios. These scenarios synthesize multiple data points and experiences into analytically coherent vignettes that illustrate how moral injury manifests in higher education contexts. (4) **Reflexive Validation** - Throughout analysis, the author engaged in reflexive memoing to interrogate assumptions, consider alternative interpretations, and ensure that claims were supported by multiple sources rather than isolated experiences.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of this emic qualitative study: triangulation across document analysis and experiences, prolonged engagement within the institutional context over multiple years, theoretical grounding in established leader character scholarship, anonymization and abstraction to minimize personal or institutional identification. Rather than claiming neutrality, this study claims moral seriousness, analytic discipline, and transparency of perspective. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, all examples and scenarios are anonymized and presented in a manner that prioritizes ethical responsibility over narrative specificity. **The purpose of this study is not to relitigate individual cases, but to advance understanding of moral injury as an institutional phenomenon and to contribute constructively to reform-oriented scholarship in higher education.**

This study has several limitations that warrant careful consideration. First, the study is informed by an emic perspective in which the author is both researcher and participant-observer. While this positionality enables deep insight into institutional processes that are often inaccessible to external researchers, it also introduces the possibility of subjective interpretation (Spiers, 2000). To mitigate this risk, the analysis emphasizes patterns across multiple data sources rather than relying on singular experiences, and it situates individual observations within established theoretical frameworks. Nonetheless, readers should interpret findings as contextually grounded interpretations, not claims of universal causality. Importantly, the study does not claim neutrality in the positivist sense. Instead, it claims reflexive transparency, recognizing that moral injury research necessarily involves value-laden judgments about justice, integrity, and institutional responsibility. Second, the findings are derived from a bounded set of institutional contexts and experiences within several higher education institutions. As such, the study does not seek statistical generalizability. Rather, it aims for analytic and theoretical transferability that is, providing sufficiently rich description and conceptual clarity such that readers can assess relevance to their own institutional settings. The scenarios presented are intentionally anonymized and abstracted, which strengthens ethical protection but limits contextual specificity. This abstraction may reduce the ability to trace causal chains in fine-grained detail, even as it enhances the focus on structural dynamics rather than individual actors. Third, the data sources include archival documents and lived or observed experiences rather than real-time ethnographic observation or formal interviews. While archival documents provide stable, contemporaneous records of institutional processes, and experiential data offer insight into moral and relational dynamics, the absence of recorded interviews limits the inclusion of multiple articulated perspectives in participants' own voices. However, this limitation also reflects a broader reality:

moral injury in higher education is frequently underreported, silenced, or informally communicated, making traditional data collection methods difficult or ethically fraught. The methods used in this study are thus both a limitation and a response to the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Fourth, some elements of the analysis involve retrospective interpretation of events and documents. Although contemporaneous records were used where possible, retrospective sensemaking can introduce bias as experiences are reinterpreted over time. To address this, the analysis privileges documented inconsistencies, repeated patterns, and institutional responses over emotional recall, and it avoids attributing intent where evidence is ambiguous. Finally, this study does not attempt to fully reconstruct or adjudicate institutional counter-narratives. The purpose is not to evaluate the correctness of administrative decisions, but to examine how institutional processes, regardless of intent, can produce moral injury when leader character is fragmented or misaligned. Future research would benefit from multi-perspective studies that include administrators, faculty, and staff across roles, as well as comparative analyses across institutions. Such work could further test and refine the theoretical claims advanced here.

IV. RESULTS

In this section, we showcase a series of scenarios, presented as situational judgements and building on prior work (Pierrakos et al., 2025; Koehler et al., 2025), that point to different forms of moral injury in higher education. The scenarios are also accompanied by a set of responses, which are mapped to embodied and deficient leader character dimensions.

Moral injury occurs when ethical reporting results in punishment rather than protection.

The institution's failure of accountability and justice transfers moral burden to the individual. One example scenario is shown below. Option B most directly resists institutional betrayal, though it may increase short-term risk. Options A and D internalize harm and deepen injury.

Scenario 1: You observe repeated deviations from stated policy in faculty evaluations and point out differences in standards being used. The institution has a formal whistleblower and non-retaliation policy emphasizing ethical responsibility. Your concerns are dismissed and ignored. After reporting concerns through designated internal channels, your actions are recharacterized as “disruptive” and you are placed under increased performance scrutiny. Such patterns are applied to others who speak up.

Response Options

- A. Withdraw the concern and signal renewed commitment to administrative priorities.
- B. Document all interactions and request third-party or independent review per policy.
- C. Escalate concerns informally to trusted senior leaders outside formal channels.
- D. Accept the scrutiny as unavoidable and focus exclusively on personal performance.

Leader Character Mapping

Response	Embodied Character Dimensions	Deficient Character Dimensions
A	—	Integrity, Courage, Accountability
B	Courage, Integrity, Accountability, Justice	—
C	Humanity, Collaboration	Justice, Accountability
D	Temperance	Courage, Justice

Moral injury stems from **procedural injustice masked as professionalism**. When standards are vague and selectively enforced, individuals experience moral confusion and erosion of trust. Option B seeks structural clarity, which can mitigate injury. Silence and withdrawal (A, D) normalize injustice. This scenario reflects a clear form of moral injury rooted in institutional betrayal, where ethical action, such as raising concerns about fairness and policy adherence, results in punishment rather than protection. The individual acts in alignment with both personal values and formal institutional commitments, including stated policies on equity, whistleblowing, and non-retaliation, yet the system responds by dismissing the concern, reframing it as misconduct, and imposing heightened scrutiny. This reverses the moral order: instead of addressing potential injustice, the institution shifts the burden onto the person who surfaced it, effectively assigning responsibility without protection and using process as a mechanism of discipline rather than accountability. The harm extends beyond the individual to the broader community, as patterns of retaliation signal that speaking up carries risk, thereby suppressing future reporting, weakening equity efforts, and normalizing inconsistency in standards. Over time, this dynamic erodes trust in governance, undermines psychological safety, and creates a culture where individuals either internalize harm through silence and compliance or face escalating personal and professional consequences for acting with integrity, a defining condition for moral injury.

In higher education, we also see moral injury in the use of gaslighting which produces moral injury by destabilizing one's moral self-trust. One such example is shown below. Option B restores epistemic grounding and moral coherence. Option A accelerates injury by forcing internalization of false narratives.

Scenario 2: You are an administrative leader who has received years of positive evaluations and achieved outstanding outcomes. You voice concerns over policy violations and differential standards being applied. Suddenly, your direct supervisor claim there have been “longstanding concerns” about your performance, though no prior documentation exists to reflects this. When you reference past evaluations, you are told they are “no longer relevant.” You request examples of the concerns and none are provided. Your supervisor’s supervisor praises your leadership and work. Misalignment exists.

Response Options

- A. Accept the new narrative and focus on improvement without referencing the past.
- B. Present prior evaluations and request reconciliation of contradictory claims.
- C. Question the credibility of the evaluation process publicly.
- D. Seek external validation (awards, rankings, references) to counter the narrative.

Leader Character Mapping

Response	Embodied Dimensions	Deficient Dimensions
A	Temperance	Integrity, Justice
B	Integrity, Accountability, Judgment	—
C	Courage	Judgment, Temperance
D	Prudence	Accountability

Moral injury arises when integrity-driven leadership is reframed as a problem. **Moral injury can emerge from routine operational decisions when institutional character is fragmented.**

Moral injury in institutions can be understood as a consequence of structural fragmentation, where mission, authority, resources, and values are split across disconnected parts of an organization such that individuals are held responsible for outcomes they lack the power to achieve. These are challenges I have witnessed personally. In these environments, professionals are guided by clear moral commitments, such as educating students or caring for others, yet are constrained by competing institutional logics like efficiency, compliance, or financial pressures, forcing them to act against their own judgment or remain complicit in harm. Authority is distributed, accountability is localized, and support is often insufficient, producing a condition of “accountability without agency” in which frontline leaders absorb the ethical burden of decisions made elsewhere and often by those in higher administrative positions. Over time, this gap between what one believes is right and what one is permitted or able to do leads to loss of trust and erosion of purpose reflecting the core dynamics of moral injury as arising from perpetration, failure to prevent harm, or betrayal by systems and higher administration leaders.

In the scenario below, the injury does not arise from the simple act of sharing space itself, but from: bypassing appropriate leadership channels, punishing an individual for an issue they were not given the opportunity to address, escalating a conflict that could otherwise be easily mitigated, and rewarding escalation over collaboration. When the academic leader is reprimanded without consultation, justice and accountability are violated simultaneously: responsibility is assigned without authority, and process is used as discipline rather than coordination. This creates moral injury by undermining the leader’s sense of fairness, agency, and trust in institutional governance. Options A and D internalize the harm by accepting injustice or prioritizing conflict avoidance over student welfare, reinforcing a culture where ethical accommodation is risky. Option C risks interpersonal retaliation without addressing systemic

failure. Option B most clearly preserves moral agency by insisting on procedural clarity and fair governance, while exposing deficiencies in institutional judgment and collaboration. At the institutional level, this scenario reveals a broader character failure: systems that incentivize complaint and escalation over shared responsibility and humane problem-solving (such as recognizing that a colleague does not have adequate research space and thus the new graduate student is also hindered). Over time, such dynamics teach faculty and leaders that acting generously, collaboratively, or in service of students may carry disproportionate personal risk—an archetypal condition for moral injury in higher education.

Scenario 3: A new graduate student is recruited, and the student’s faculty advisor does not yet have dedicated laboratory space. Two assistant professors who share a large laboratory are asked informally whether the student could temporarily use a small temporary footprint of space in the lab. One assistant professor agrees immediately and offers space on their side of the lab, viewing this as reasonable accommodation that supports the student’s success and the broader research mission of the academic unit in support of a colleague. The second assistant professor objects, complains that the arrangement is inappropriate, and escalates the issue directly to senior administrators. No consultation takes place prior to the escalation and a reprimand.

Response Options

- A. Accept the reprimand and adjust future practices without addressing the lack of consultation.
- B. Request documentation of the concern and clarify expectations regarding escalation, consultation, and resource governance.
- C. Privately confront the assistant professor who escalated the issue without following unit-level processes.
- D. Reverse the shared-space arrangement to avoid further conflict, even if it negatively impacts the graduate student.

Leader Character Mapping

Response	Embodied Dimensions	Deficient Dimensions
A	Temperance	Justice, Accountability, Integrity
B	Justice, Accountability, Judgment, Integrity	—
C	Courage	Judgment, Temperance, Humanity
D	Temperance (misapplied)	Humanity, Justice, Integrity

Scenario 3 illustrates how moral injury in higher education can arise not from the underlying logistical issue, which is easily resolvable, but from institutional failures in conflict resolution that fracture fairness, process, and trust. When simple disagreements are escalated through bypassing appropriate leadership channels, individuals are denied the opportunity to respond,

and disciplinary actions occur without consultation, responsibility becomes decoupled from authority and process is weaponized rather than used to coordinate collective action. In such contexts, leaders are held accountable for decisions they were neither empowered to make nor invited to shape, violating core expectations of procedural justice and shared governance. This creates moral injury by undermining an individual's sense of agency, fairness, and institutional integrity, while signaling that collaborative, student-centered actions may carry personal risk. The normalization of escalation over dialogue and complaint over collegial problem-solving reflects a deeper institutional fragmentation, where systems reward self-protection rather than shared responsibility. Over time, these dynamics erode trust, discourage ethical action, and condition faculty and leaders to disengage or comply with practices they believe are misaligned with the educational mission, which is a defining condition for moral injury.

The next scenario exposes how **curriculum—often framed as a technical or procedural matter—is in fact a moral domain**. Curricular governance in higher education is a moral practice (Pierrakos, 2025). **The moral injury arises when institutional processes elevate faculty comfort and authority over student learning, agency, and future opportunities, while simultaneously punishing leaders who act in service of students.** By reprimanding the chair for “driving change” while offering no alternative mechanism to address documented student harm, the institution violates justice (students bear the cost of inaction), humanity (student needs are deprioritized), and accountability (no one is responsible for outcomes). Responsibility without authority is imposed on the chair, while authority without responsibility remains with faculty resistant to change—an archetypal condition for moral injury. Options A and D normalize ethical disengagement by treating student harm as an acceptable byproduct of faculty stability. Option C risks procedural overreach and further conflict. Option B preserves moral agency by honoring shared governance while refusing to decenter students, making visible the tension between process and purpose. At the institutional level, this scenario reveals a deeper character failure: when shared governance is invoked to block change rather than steward student flourishing, it becomes a moral shield rather than a moral commitment. Over time, such practices teach leaders that advocating for students is risky, that moral responsibility is uncoupled from authority, and that institutional values are conditional—core ingredients of moral injury in higher education.

Scenario 4: Students in an academic program repeatedly express the desire for new courses and emerging concentrations that better reflect contemporary practice, interdisciplinary interests, and career pathways. External advisors and peer institutions also signal that curricular modernization is necessary to remain relevant. Some faculty members, however, resist change, citing the stability of existing courses they have taught for many years and discomfort with revising or sunseting familiar material. Despite student demand and external evidence, these faculty argue that curricular change is disruptive and unnecessary. The department chair works with students, advisory input, and institutional data to propose new courses and concentrations while

maintaining core requirements. In response, senior administrators reprimand the chair, stating that *all curricular decisions must be made exclusively by faculty*, and that the chair should not be “driving change.” The proposed changes are halted. As a result, students continue to experience a curriculum that no longer aligns with their needs or professional realities.

Response Options (for the Academic Leader)

- A. Defer entirely to faculty preferences and cease advocating for curricular change, prioritizing departmental harmony.
- B. Facilitate a structured, evidence-based curricular review process that centers student impact, external benchmarks, and shared faculty governance.
- C. Proceed with limited curricular updates through administrative mechanisms to avoid further delay.
- D. Step back from curricular leadership altogether and allow the program to remain unchanged.

Leader Character Mapping

Response	Embodied Dimensions	Deficient Dimensions
A	Temperance (misapplied)	Humanity, Justice, Courage
B	Justice, Humanity, Collaboration, Judgment, Integrity	—
C	Courage	Collaboration, Temperance, Accountability
D	Temperance (avoidant)	Humanity, Accountability, Integrity

This scenario illustrates moral injury emerging from a breakdown in shared governance and the misalignment of responsibility, authority, and mission. The department chair is acting in good faith to fulfill core educational obligations by responding to student needs, external signals, and institutional data, yet is reprimanded for doing so, effectively being held accountable for program relevance without being permitted to exercise leadership to achieve it. This creates a condition of “responsibility without authority,” where ethical and professional judgment is constrained by rigid or selectively applied interpretations of governance. At the same time, students bear the consequences of institutional inertia, as their expressed needs and evolving professional realities are subordinated to faculty preference and administrative risk avoidance. The harm is twofold: for the chair, it produces moral injury through the erosion of agency, fairness, and trust in institutional processes; for the broader academic community, it signals that acting in service of students, innovation, and evidence-based improvement may be penalized rather than supported. Over time, this dynamic discourages leadership, suppresses responsiveness, and normalizes a culture where preserving the status quo is safer than advancing the educational mission, thereby deepening institutional fragmentation and undermining long-term program vitality.

In the last scenario, we see how moral injury can have systemic implications when adherence to ethical standards does not ensure fair treatment and that institutional processes may prioritize risk containment or internal protection over integrity and justice.

Scenario 5: Ethical Compliance, IRB Oversight, and Institutional Response

A faculty member serves as Principal Investigator on two IRB-approved, minimal-risk survey studies that include clear informed consent procedures and have no history of compliance concerns. During active data collection, both studies are placed on administrative hold by the IRB committee. The stated rationale is not tied to any identified issue within the study itself, but instead to a concern involving a staff coordinator on an unrelated project led by a different Principal Investigator. The faculty member requests clarification and offers documentation demonstrating compliance, including consent language and survey procedures, and asks for a targeted review of their approved protocol. No specific violations are identified, and no opportunity is provided to address or resolve concerns specific to the study. Efforts to seek clarity through appropriate institutional channels yield limited transparency. Institutional leaders are unable to articulate the regulatory or policy basis for the hold, and no independent review is initiated. The same IRB leadership responsible for the decision is positioned to oversee any audit or evaluation, raising concerns about conflict of interest. The study remains on hold, halting data collection, disrupting timelines, and affecting the investigator's ability to meet scholarly and grant-related obligations.

Response Options (for the Principal Investigator)

- A. Accept the administrative hold and wait for resolution without further inquiry.
- B. Document all communications, request a formal written justification tied to policy, and seek independent or third-party review per institutional and federal guidelines.
- C. Escalate concerns informally through personal networks or senior contacts outside formal channels.
- D. Modify or abandon the study to comply with the hold, regardless of unresolved concerns.

Leader Character Mapping

Response	Embodied Dimensions	Deficient Dimensions
A	Temperance (misapplied)	Justice, Accountability, Courage
B	Justice, Integrity, Accountability, Judgment, Courage	—
C	Courage	Judgment, Temperance, Accountability
D	Temperance (avoidant)	Integrity, Justice, Accountability

The moral injury in the IRB scenario above is not simply about delay or administrative burden, it arises from a deeper rupture between the institution's stated ethical commitments and its enacted practices. The IRB is positioned as a protector of ethical research, grounded in principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, and due process. When a compliant study is placed on hold without a clearly articulated rationale, without the opportunity for the investigator to respond, and without transparent alignment to policy or regulation, the process shifts from ethical oversight to opaque control. The investigator, who has acted in good faith to meet all ethical requirements, experiences a form of institutional betrayal - the very system designed to uphold ethical standards instead undermines them. This produces a distinct form of moral injury characterized by **responsibility without agency**. The investigator remains fully accountable for ethical conduct, regulatory compliance, and scholarly progress, yet is denied the authority to proceed or to remedy unspecified concerns. This misalignment erodes core dimensions of leader character, particularly justice (lack of fair process and consistent standards), accountability (absence of clear ownership for decisions), and judgment (failure to apply policy proportionately and contextually). Over time, repeated exposure to such conditions can destabilize an individual's moral framework, leading to self-doubt, questioning of one's professional integrity, and a diminished belief that ethical action will be recognized or protected. The harm extends beyond the individual to the broader research environment. When transparency is absent and concerns are not clearly defined, investigators are left to infer expectations, often leading to overcompliance, risk aversion, or disengagement from innovative or meaningful research. If raising questions or seeking clarification is perceived as risky, a chilling effect emerges, discouraging open dialogue and ethical reporting. This weakens the very safeguards the IRB is intended to uphold. In this way, moral injury becomes systemic as it signals to the academic community that adherence to ethical standards does not ensure fair treatment, and that institutional processes may prioritize risk containment or internal protection over integrity and justice.

V. DISCUSSION

This paper advances moral injury as a critical and underexamined lens for understanding ethical harm in higher education and in engineering education. Across the situational judgment scenarios presented, moral injury emerges not from extraordinary misconduct, but from ordinary institutional practices—evaluation processes, governance norms, resource allocation decisions, and responses to ethical dissent. These are precisely the domains that higher education typically treats as neutral, procedural, or managerial rather than moral. A central finding of this work is that moral injury in higher education is structural rather than dispositional. The scenarios consistently show that individuals who act with integrity, care, and professional responsibility are often placed at risk not because of poor judgment, but because institutional systems lack coherent leader character. When accountability is diffused, standards are vague, and discretion is applied selectively, moral burden is shifted onto individuals who must choose

between self-protection and ethical action. This reframing is significant. Much of the literature on ethical failure in higher education focuses on individual misconduct or compliance breakdowns. In contrast, the findings here demonstrate that institutions can produce moral injury while remaining formally compliant with policy and law. Moral injury thus becomes an indicator of deeper misalignment between institutional values and institutional behavior.

When analyzed through the leader character framework, the scenarios reveal recurring deficiencies across key character dimensions—particularly justice, accountability, courage, and judgment. Institutions routinely espouse these virtues rhetorically, yet fail to enact them when decisions involve risk, reputation, or power redistribution. For example, justice is compromised when similarly situated individuals are treated differently without transparent justification. Accountability erodes when leaders assign responsibility without authority or reprimand individuals without consultation. Courage is selectively valued—celebrated when it aligns with institutional interests and punished when it challenges them. Judgment, the integrating dimension of leader character, is often reduced to expediency rather than ethical discernment. These breakdowns give rise to what can be understood as institutional betrayal: the experience of being harmed by systems that claim moral authority and legitimacy. Moral injury, in this sense, is not merely personal distress but a rational response to systemic character failure.

The use of situational judgment scenarios represents an important methodological contribution to the study of moral injury in higher education. Situational judgements make visible the moral micro-decisions embedded in everyday academic life—decisions that are rarely named as ethical but have profound moral consequences. By mapping response options to embodied and deficient leader character dimensions, the scenarios demonstrate that moral injury is not inevitable; it is contingent on institutional responses. In nearly every scenario, at least one response preserves moral agency by insisting on fairness, transparency, and accountability. However, these responses often entail personal or professional risk, revealing how institutions tacitly discourage ethical action through incentive structures and cultural norms.

While this paper is situated within engineering education, the findings have broad implications across higher education. Engineering education is currently investing heavily in ethics, character, and professional responsibility. Yet, the scenarios presented here suggest a troubling paradox: institutions that teach ethics may simultaneously inflict moral injury on those who practice it. For students, exposure to such environments risks normalizing ethical compromise and silence. For faculty and academic leaders, repeated moral injury can lead to disengagement, cynicism, or withdrawal from leadership and innovation. At the institutional level, these dynamics erode trust, diminish moral credibility, and undermine the stated purpose of higher education as a force for societal good.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that moral injury is not an anomaly in higher education, it signals misalignment between institutional values and institutional character. It signals governance systems that prioritize *control over care*, *reputation over responsibility*, and *compliance over conscience*. And it signals that higher education cannot fulfill its moral and societal mission without attending to the moral consequences of its own practices. **By integrating moral injury theory with leader character scholarship, this study reframes ethical failure in higher education as a matter of institutional character development, not merely policy refinement or individual resilience.** Moral injury cannot be resolved by asking individuals to cope better, be more professional, or demonstrate greater resilience. Such responses risk compounding harm by placing responsibility on those already injured. Instead, moral repair in higher education requires: transparent and consistent standards of evaluation and governance, structures that protect ethical dissent and moral courage, leadership development that prioritizes character and judgment over positional authority, and institutional willingness to examine where its practices contradict its professed values. Situational judgment scenarios offer one practical pathway forward, making moral tensions visible, discussable, and assessable. Used thoughtfully, they can support faculty development, leadership education, and institutional self-reflection. Ultimately, higher education cannot educate for ethical leadership while failing to lead ethically. If universities are to advance humanity—as they so often claim—they must confront the moral injuries they produce and commit to cultivating institutions of character, not just individuals of character. **Moral injury, once named and understood, becomes not only a critique of higher education, but an invitation to reform higher education. The motivation of this paper is to support higher education’s reform from the lens of character.**

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