



Understanding Students' Prosocial Behavior in Educational Settings: A Pragmatist and Experiential Guidance Approach

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Abstract: This study aims to examine students' prosocial behavior as a central construct in higher education through a philosophical and theoretical lens, using pragmatism as its philosophical foundation and experiential guidance as its conceptual framework. A qualitative conceptual and philosophical analysis was employed by synthesizing peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar, seminal philosophical works on pragmatism, and theoretical literature on prosocial behavior, experiential learning, and higher education. The data were analyzed through conceptual synthesis to identify recurring concepts, dominant themes, and theoretical gaps in the existing literature. The findings indicate that students' prosocial behavior is a dynamic capacity developed through lived experience, social interaction, and reflective processes rather than an innate trait or merely a by-product of academic achievement. Pragmatist philosophy provides a coherent framework for understanding prosocial development as emerging from action and its social consequences, while experiential guidance offers an educational approach that effectively facilitates this developmental process. This study makes a conceptual contribution by integrating pragmatism and experiential guidance into a coherent theoretical foundation for fostering students' prosocial behavior, particularly among PGSD students and pre-service elementary school teachers within the context of guidance services and character development.

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Introduction

Recent literature has increasingly emphasized prosocial behavior as a key psychological factor supporting undergraduate students' mental health and well-being. A scoping review of prosocial behavior interventions implemented among undergraduate populations reported that engagement in prosocial activities may buffer negative mental health outcomes and contribute to positive health indicators (Cuba, 2024). This growing body of research reflects a broader shift in higher education, moving beyond an exclusive focus on academic competence toward the cultivation of students' social, emotional, and moral dispositions. In this context, prosocial behavior is increasingly recognized not merely as an incidental outcome of education, but as a crucial developmental target that supports both individual well-being and collective social functioning.

Universities, like formative social environments, play a pivotal role in shaping students' orientations toward others. Undergraduate students encounter complex academic, social, and personal challenges that require adaptive, cooperative, and empathetic responses. Consequently, fostering prosocial behavior among students has become an important concern for higher education institutions seeking to promote holistic student development and prepare



graduates who can contribute constructively to society (Brandenberger & Bowman, 2015; Nikolskiy et al., 2025).

Empirical studies on prosocial behavior in higher education have predominantly approached the topic through intervention-based and health-related frameworks. Recent research highlights the effectiveness of structured interventions, such as service-learning and community engagement programs, in promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors while simultaneously enhancing students' mental health and well-being (Nikolskiy et al., 2025; Severino-González et al., 2022). These approaches integrate academic instruction with real-world activities, allowing students to experience the social consequences of their actions and develop a sense of responsibility toward others.

From a psychological perspective, prosocial behavior is widely understood as a dynamic construct shaped by social interaction rather than an innate personal trait, evolving through continuous engagement with social contexts and reflecting an adaptive orientation toward cooperative group functioning (Ryzin et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2023; Nikolskiy et al., 2025). This growing attention signals a shift from solely addressing academic competence toward nurturing students' social and psychological dispositions, positioning prosocial behavior as a developmental target rather than a mere outcome. However, despite this growth, existing studies largely conceptualize prosocial behavior in instrumental terms—emphasizing outcomes, effectiveness, and measurable impacts—while giving limited attention to its underlying philosophical, ontological, and axiological foundations. This gap is significant, since educational practice is inherently shaped by philosophical worldviews that define what is considered valuable, meaningful, and desirable in human development. It is this gap that pragmatism is well positioned to address, as it views values not as fixed entities but as emerging from lived experience and social action.

Pragmatism, especially as articulated by John Dewey, offers a distinctive philosophical framework for understanding prosocial behavior as emerging from lived experience, social interaction, and reflective action. Dewey's notion of persistent growth emphasizes that moral and social dispositions develop through engagement with real-life problems and communal practices rather than through abstract moral instruction alone (Boyd et al., 2022). From this perspective, prosocial behavior is not a fixed attribute but a habit formed through experiential processes embedded in social contexts (Nikolskiy et al., 2025). This philosophical lens provides a novel contribution to the literature by situating prosocial behavior within a broader understanding of human action, experience, and social responsibility.

Given the predominance of empirical and intervention-based approaches, a critical question remains: how can prosocial behavior among undergraduate students be conceptually understood and developed when examined through a philosophical lens that emphasizes experience, action, and social consequences, while accounting for both individual and institutional influences (Stiff et al., 2019). This question carries particular weight for PGSD (Primary School Teacher Education) students. Unlike students in many other disciplines, PGSD students are preparing to enter classrooms in which their own everyday conduct functions as a direct moral model for young children, and in which they will be expected to provide basic guidance and socio-emotional support to their pupils. For this population, prosocial behavior is therefore not only a marker of healthy personal development but a core professional competency that elementary-aged children will observe and emulate, making its philosophical and pedagogical grounding especially consequential.



Therefore, the purpose of this study to critically examine prosocial behavior among undergraduate students through a philosophical and theoretical lens, with pragmatism serving as the primary philosophical foundation. This review aims to articulate how pragmatist principles can inform experiential guidance approaches in higher education and contribute to the development of students' prosocial behavior. By synthesizing philosophical insights and contemporary educational practices, this article seeks to address the gap in the literature concerning the philosophical underpinnings of prosocial behavior development in university contexts and to offer a conceptual basis for future research and practice (Bains & Turnbull, 2019; Chandarlis, 2024; Börü, 2017; Geraldo et al., 2017).

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using conceptual and philosophical analysis to examine how prosocial behavior among undergraduate students can be explained through pragmatist philosophy and experiential processes as a psychological and educational framework. Because the study was theoretical in nature, it did not involve researcher attendance in a field setting, empirical participants, research location, or research duration; instead, the units of analysis consisted of concepts, philosophical arguments, and theoretical perspectives derived from scholarly literature.

Although this study is not a systematic literature review, an operational scope for the literature search was defined for transparency. Literature was retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar using combinations of the keywords "prosocial behavior," "pragmatism," "experiential learning," "experiential guidance," "service-learning," and "higher education." Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters addressing prosocial behavior, experiential learning, or pragmatism in educational contexts, together with seminal philosophical texts on pragmatism, particularly the work of John Dewey. No rigid publication-year restriction was applied, so as to accommodate foundational philosophical sources; the empirical literature reviewed, however, is predominantly drawn from the past decade. The units of analysis included philosophical works on pragmatism, theoretical literature on experiential learning and experiential guidance, and peer-reviewed studies on prosocial behavior in higher education, selected on the basis of conceptual relevance, theoretical significance, and scholarly credibility, with priority given to literature addressing prosocial behavior, experiential learning, social interaction, reflection, and pragmatism in educational contexts (Cuba, 2024; Ryzin et al., 2020; Nikolskiy et al., 2025; Boyd et al., 2022).

The research procedure involved identifying, reviewing, and synthesizing key philosophical and theoretical works related to prosocial behavior, experiential learning, pragmatism, and higher education, with literature selected based on conceptual fit and theoretical contribution rather than a comprehensive database-driven inclusion process. This procedure enabled an in-depth examination of the assumptions, mechanisms, and explanatory processes underlying prosocial behavior development in university settings (Brandenberger & Bowman, 2015; Huang et al., 2023).

Data collection was conducted through systematic reading, documentation, and classification of primary academic sources from psychology, education, and philosophy. Because this was a conceptual study, no empirical measurement instruments were used. The trustworthiness of the analysis was established through conceptual triangulation across multiple theoretical perspectives and by comparing convergent and contrasting arguments from the reviewed literature.



Data analysis was carried out using a conceptual synthesis approach (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005), proceeding through four stages: (1) identifying major concepts related to prosocial behavior, pragmatism, and experiential processes from the selected literature; (2) categorizing and comparatively analyzing these concepts to clarify their meanings, characteristics, and interrelationships; (3) conducting a philosophical analysis of how pragmatist assumptions about experience, action, and social consequences align with experiential approaches to prosocial development; and (4) synthesizing the findings into an integrative conceptual framework explaining prosocial behavior as a dynamic capacity shaped through experience, reflection, and social interaction in higher education contexts.

Results and Discussion

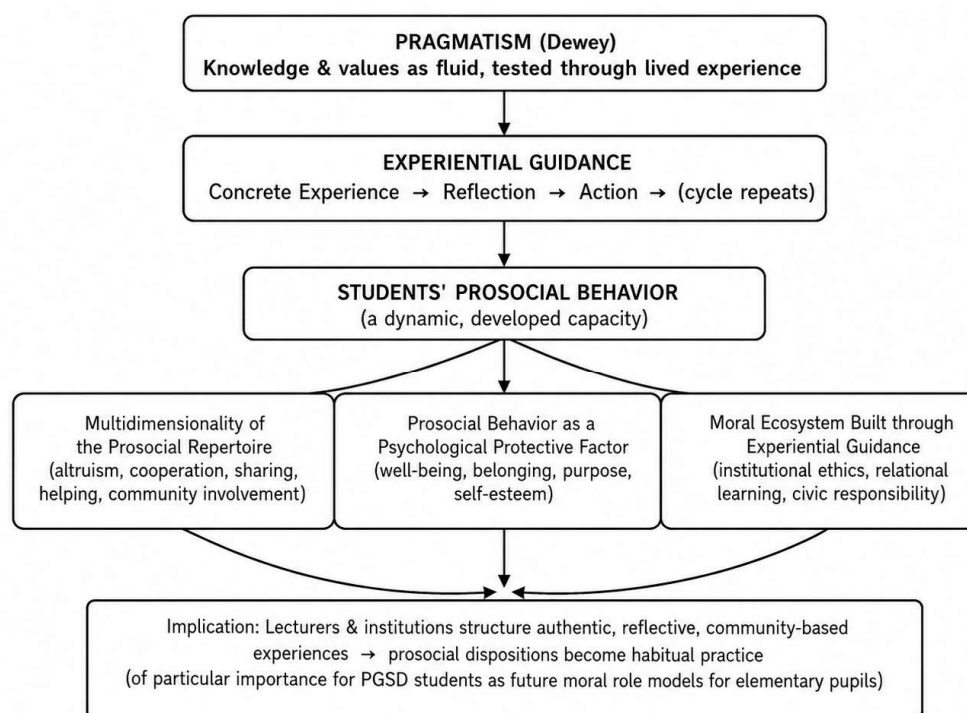


Figure 1. Concept Map Linking Deweyan Pragmatism, Experiential Guidance, and Students' Prosocial Behavior Based on the Study Findings

This review synthesizes evidence on the development of prosocial behavior among undergraduate students through experiential pedagogical guidance, viewed through the lens of pragmatist philosophy. The synthesis converges on three interrelated themes, discussed below: the multidimensionality of the prosocial repertoire in higher education, prosocial behavior as a psychological protective factor, and the construction of a moral ecosystem through experiential guidance.

The Multidimensionality of Prosocial Repertoire in Higher Education

The prosocial behavioral phenomenon in higher education should not be viewed as unitary, but as a multicomponent behavioral repertoire spanning voluntary acts ranging from altruism, cooperation, and sharing to helping, comforting, and community involvement—acts that cross and integrate private and public domains and that may be spontaneous or planned (Alfirević et al., 2023). In the university context, this multidimensionality takes shape through peer mentoring, collaborative project work, and community engagement, which



together contribute to a positive socio-educational milieu and extend the social value of learning into the community (Pinto & Costa-Ramalho, 2023). Scientifically, this phenomenon exists because prosocial behavior is socially contingent: educational structures that provide students with socially meaningful, goal-directed opportunities to help others give rise to this repertoire in the first place.

Collaborative learning tends to motivate individuals to engage in prosocial behavior (Ryzin et al., 2020), which is why higher education's growing focus on teaching prosocial behavior is not without purpose. It reflects an understanding that today's graduates need to work with and care for others, not merely possess knowledge, in order to address relevant social issues (Nikolskiy et al., 2025). This compels institutions to treat the teaching of social and cooperative behavior as part of the student community's social responsibility (Esparza-Reig, 2020) and as a social demand consistent with the holistic approaches that several countries advocate for human and community development (Wang et al., 2025; Poma-Lagos et al., 2025).

This repertoire is operationalized through specific pedagogies. Cooperative learning strengthens prosocial attitudes and actions by structuring tasks around positive interdependence and mutual help, so that helping others becomes both socially and instrumentally rewarded (Ryzin et al., 2020). Service-learning—one of the most cited mechanisms—combines academic content with active community participation, enabling students to appreciate the social impact of their behavior and embrace civic responsibility (Nikolskiy et al., 2025; Suyato & Hidayah, 2024), an effect reinforced when students observe tangible community impact that connects civic engagement with disciplinary knowledge (Hunter & Brisbin, 2000; Ribeiro et al., 2023); participation in such programs is associated with stronger interpersonal skills, enhanced civic responsibility, and a greater capacity to address community problems, consistent with higher education's broader aim of producing socially responsible citizens (Konishi & Wong, 2018; Nikolskiy et al., 2025). Relatedly, integrating physical education with civic education has been shown to amplify teamwork, democratic participation, and conflict-resolution skills that support prosocial behavior and intergroup cooperation (Huang et al., 2023). Taken together, this evidence suggests that prosociality grows most when students engage in real communities and activities, rather than when they are merely told about abstract social values.

Prosocial Behavior as a Psychological Protective Factor

Beyond its behavioral manifestations, prosocial behavior functions as a protective factor for students' mental health and well-being, creating a reinforcing cycle of helping others and flourishing psychologically (Tendhar & Mesquita, 2020). This occurs because prosocial actions like peer support, collaboration, and teamwork, so foster belonging, reduce social isolation, and expand support networks essential for well-being in campus environments (Astleitner & Zumbach, 2023). Psychological well-being is further strengthened through processes of self-agency and positive social contribution, whereby acts of kindness enhance overall purpose and self-esteem (Huang et al., 2023).

Empirically, the Cuban higher-education context illustrates how ethical and prosocial outcomes mediate the relationship between the academic environment and academic success (Cuba, 2024). Consistent with this, Amaral and Frick (2022), building on Ryzin et al. (2020), show that engaging students in prosocial development helps counter antisocial outcomes such as bullying by fostering inclusive, supportive campus and all environments that simultaneously protect students' mental health and sustain their academic motivation.



Constructing a Moral Ecosystem through Experiential Guidance

Universities do more than transmit knowledge; they also function as moral ecosystems, providing students with internalized standards of academic integrity, ethical respect, and conduct through the everyday moral fabric of institutional life, including teacher–student relationships and students' orientation toward the academic environment (Bihu & Ngeiyamu, 2023), an effect also documented for service-learning as a vehicle of moral education within Indonesian higher education specifically (Hidayat & Balakrishnan, 2024). Pragmatism, particularly as articulated by Dewey, supplies a coherent philosophical rationale for this ecosystem view. Rather than treating values as fixed entities, pragmatism understands knowledge and morality as fluid, dialogic, and continuously tested against lived experience (Nuriyeva et al., 2025; Larsen, 2025; Bachkirova & Borrington, 2018; Menary, 2016). From this standpoint, prosocial behavior develops through individuals' engaged participation in solving real problems within a community, rather than through abstract moral instruction (Horn, 2013; Nikolskiy et al., 2025); moral judgment is treated as situational, shaped by cultural, individual, and contextual variables, which cautions against approaches that isolate prosocial behavior from its social context (Yousefi et al., 2024). This instrumental view of truth—as a resource for improving the quality of human life and justifies educational approaches oriented toward tangible social betterment, the testing of action through its consequences, and self-corrective learning rather than doctrinal rigidity (Korte & Mercurio, 2017; Lindqvist, 2019; Kizel, 2017), consistent with the broader pragmatist claim that values arise through active engagement with the world (Duarte et al., 2024).

This philosophical grounding aligns with developmental accounts emphasizing that prosocial capacity emerges through ongoing social interaction rather than in isolation (Korte & Mercurio, 2017). Because ethical action is intersubjectively sustained, individuals acquire prosocial norms through observation, active participation, and relational feedback loops that cultivate empathy and social responsibility (Carpendale & Wallbridge, 2023; Gillberg & Vo, 2014). Universities are therefore particularly well positioned to foster prosociality: by structuring repeated encounters with ethical dilemmas and collaborative tasks, they help students develop civic responsibility within and beyond the formal curriculum, treating peers and communities as subjects to work with rather than objects to act upon (Carpendale & Wallbridge, 2023; Gregory & Lavery, 2017; Nikolskiy et al., 2025).

Experiential guidance operationalizes this philosophical and relational foundation through concrete pedagogical mechanisms. Experiential learning immerses students in real-life problems that demand ethical decision-making, cultivating empathy, collaboration, and civic responsibility through responsible action (Morris, 2019; Ramadhani et al., 2024). Structured reflection then converts that experience into moral learning through an action–reflection cycle, in which students iterate between theory and practice, deepening their understanding of prosociality while developing initiative, self-evaluation, and durable character change (Bartle, 2015; Morris, 2019; Sinaga & Artati, 2017; Shalabi, 2020); such experiential learning has also been linked to gains in recruitment, retention, and completion, underscoring its dual contribution to personal and academic development (Bartle, 2015).

These mechanisms are most effective for prosociality when they are authentic, developmentally progressive, and embedded in community-based challenges—as in community-based learning, project-based learning, service-learning, simulation, and role-play, particularly when these involve meaningful contact with disadvantaged groups (Moon, 2020; Skov et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2021; Nikolskiy et al., 2025; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2025). Their benefits, however, are conditional: they depend on structured debriefing that connects



experience to broader ethical frameworks (Geraldo et al., 2017; Pinto & Costa-Ramalho, 2023), developmentally appropriate sequencing of challenge (Morris, 2019), and sustained institutional support, including faculty preparation, resources, and stable community partnerships—with holistic experiential models offering curricular structures that sustain such engagement over time and build lifelong civic participation (Nikolskiy et al., 2025; Bartle, 2015; Dumbuya, 2025; Alshammari et al., 2023). This is consistent with Kolb's cyclical model of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, in which the quality of reflection substantially explains variation in outcomes such as empathy across programs, and provides a foundation for active citizenship and ethical leadership when reflective practice is sustained over time (Høium et al., 2015; Morris, 2019; Chan et al., 2021; Gencel et al., 2021; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023; Winkle et al., 2022).

These findings carry direct practical implications. For lecturers, they support intentionally designing prosocial opportunities through cooperative goal-setting, positive interdependence, community-facing tasks, and structured peer-support or guidance simulations, so that prosociality is translated from an abstract value into a repeated habit of practice (Ryzin et al., 2020; Bihu & Ngeiyamu, 2023; Nikolskiy et al., 2025). For students, such experiences build empathy, cooperation, and civic responsibility while simultaneously strengthening well-being through belonging, purpose, and social support (Astleitner & Zumbach, 2023; Huang et al., 2023; Tendhar & Mesquita, 2020). As previously noted, this relevance is especially pronounced for PGSD students, whose future role as elementary school teachers makes their own prosocial conduct a direct model for young children.

Future empirical work should test and refine this pragmatist-informed model of experiential guidance. Classroom-based design studies and quasi-experimental evaluations are needed to determine whether specific components community engagement, simulation, role-play, structured reflection and produce measurable change in empathy, cooperation, civic engagement, and willingness to help, particularly within teacher-education curricula (Nikolskiy et al., 2025; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2025; Štefáková et al., 2025), including their capacity to deepen students' understanding of social justice and diversity (Tiessen, 2018). Qualitative inquiry can illuminate how students make meaning of social consequences and reconstruct their moral orientation through experience (Larsen, 2025; Yousefi et al., 2024), while multilevel studies could disentangle the relative contributions of individual factors, such as goal orientation and prosocial motivation, and institutional factors, such as moral climate and teacher–student relationships (Astleitner & Zumbach, 2023; Cuba, 2024). Longitudinal designs are particularly important for examining whether prosocial growth cultivated during undergraduate study, especially among PGSD graduates, carries forward into professional practice (Brandenberger & Bowman, 2015; Nikolskiy et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Prosocial behavior in higher education is best understood as a dynamic, situational capacity that develops through lived experience, social interaction, and reflection-in-action, rather than as a fixed personal trait or an incidental by-product of academic achievement. By uniting pragmatism with contemporary educational research, this study offers a philosophical account of why experiential and community-engaged learning settings are effective in cultivating prosocial dispositions: pragmatism explains prosocial development as emerging from action and its social consequences, while experiential guidance specifies the educational means through which this process can be deliberately structured. The articulation of prosocial



behavior as experiential moral practice constitutes this study's main conceptual contribution, integrating empirical intervention findings with a coherent philosophical account of human action, experience, and social responsibility. This conceptual synthesis is intended as an initial foundation, to be further developed and empirically tested in subsequent research, including the studies outlined in the Recommendation section below.

Recommendation

Building on the conceptual synthesis above, concrete follow-up actions are recommended for lecturers, higher education policymakers, and future researchers.

For lecturers, particularly in PGSD and other pre-service teacher education programs, the findings highlight the importance of designing experiential learning environments that promote authentic engagement, collaboration, and reflective practice through community-based assignments, structured peer-support activities, and classroom guidance simulations, rather than relying solely on abstract instruction of prosocial values.

For higher education policymakers and institutional leaders, the findings emphasize the need to strengthen experiential guidance by supporting faculty development, fostering partnerships with schools and community organizations, and integrating prosocial and ethical competencies into curriculum standards, quality assurance systems, and teacher education accreditation frameworks.

For future researchers, this study provides a conceptual foundation for empirical investigation. Future studies should examine the relationships among pragmatism, experiential guidance, and prosocial behavior using qualitative, longitudinal, and quasi-experimental designs, particularly in teacher education, to explore the long-term development and transfer of prosocial competencies into professional practice.

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