

The multifaceted impacts of refined egoism among college students and approaches to educational guidance

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Abstract. In the Chinese context, refined egoism is distinct from reasonable self-interest in the conventional sense. Rather, it constitutes a value orientation that prioritizes individual interests over other values and strategically pursues self-interested goals by leveraging knowledge, rules, social connections, and moral discourse. Among college students, refined egoism is primarily manifested in self-interested motivations, increasingly sophisticated calculations of personal gain, strategic behavioral choices, and the rationalization of self-serving pursuits. Although this tendency may offer certain advantages in adapting to real-world circumstances, such adaptive benefits do not alter its underlying value bias. Refined egoism may exert multifaceted effects on college students' personal values, interpersonal relationships, sense of collective identity, and civic-mindedness. Higher education institutions should clarify the boundary between reasonable self-interest and refined egoism and guide students, through curriculum instruction, evaluation mechanisms, public engagement, and everyday interactions, to properly balance individual development with public responsibility, thereby promoting the integration of personal growth and public values.

Keywords: college students, refined egoism, behavioral characteristics, multifaceted impacts, ideological and political education

1. Introduction

The university years are a crucial period in which young people's values develop from initial understanding toward consolidation and from individual choices toward participation in public life. With the expansion of higher education, intensifying employment competition, and the growing integration of digital media into everyday life, college students are placing greater emphasis than ever on planning, efficiency, rules, and personal boundaries. These changes generally reflect the growth of young people's sense of agency and also help students develop stronger self-management skills in complex environments. However, when personal interests become the central criterion for evaluating all activities, and knowledge, rules, organizations, and other people are viewed merely as resources to be utilized, a reasonable sense of agency may cross its proper boundaries and develop into refined egoism. Unlike crude self-interested behavior, which directly violates rules, refined egoism often serves personal interests through compliant procedures, positive discourse, and a favorable public image, making it more covert and deceptive.

Existing research on refined egoism among college students has generally followed three lines of inquiry. First, some studies describe its manifestations in terms of self-interest, disguise, and opportunism. Second, others explain its causes from the perspectives of market competition, family education, university evaluation systems, and the media environment. Third, some studies propose countermeasures through values education, institutional governance, and the reconstruction of public life. Research has shown that refined egoism exists to a certain extent and within a limited scope among college students and should not be generalized to the image of young people as a whole [1]. Not all college students who have clearly defined goals, value returns, or are adept at safeguarding their legitimate rights and interests should be categorized as refined egoists. Yang Wu and Zhijian Zhao, meanwhile, proposed the concept of "inconsistency of behavioral standards between subjects", emphasizing that refined egoists not only pursue their own interests but also expect others to follow norms that benefit them while refusing to subject themselves to the same standards [2]. These studies provide an important foundation for conceptual clarification.

There are still two aspects of the existing research that warrant further development. First, some discussions equate careful planning, effective use of rules, and self-interest directly with egoism, which can easily blur the distinctions among reasonable self-interest, instrumental rationality, and refined egoism. Second, some studies focus primarily on enumerating its negative consequences, while paying insufficient attention to the tension between its short-term adaptive effects and long-term value costs. Accordingly, this paper adopts literature analysis and normative analysis to define the basic characteristics of refined egoism from four dimensions: behavioral motivations, modes of calculation, action strategies, and mechanisms of self-interested expression. It then examines the multifaceted impacts of refined egoism among college students at the individual, interpersonal, and campus-community levels and proposes educational guidance characterized by an awareness of boundaries, value-oriented evaluation, and practical engagement. The present study focuses on the value orientations and behavioral patterns that may occur among some college students and does not constitute a general judgment of the college student population.

2. Conceptual definition and basic characteristics of refined egoism among college students

2.1. Basic connotations of refined egoism

The term "refined egoism" originated in discussions of public education and is not yet a rigorously established academic concept with a broad scholarly consensus. At a seminar on the ideal university, Professor Qian Lique of Peking University defined "refined egoists" as people who "possess high intelligence and a high level of education, are worldly-wise and sophisticated, adept at cooperation and performance, and know how to use institutional power to achieve their own ends" [3]. Existing research generally approaches the concept from two dimensions: "egoism" and "refinement". "Egoism" concerns the purpose of behavior, namely, placing personal interests above other considerations; "refinement" concerns the means of achieving that purpose, namely, using relatively advanced cognitive abilities, knowledge of rules, and interpersonal skills to make self-serving behavior appear compliant, reasonable, or even oriented toward the public good. Some scholars regard "refined egoism" as a variant and upgraded form of egoism that often satisfies personal interests under the guise of integrating into and serving the collective [4]. Other studies, drawing on the Marxist conception of the relationship between justice and interests, argue that refined egoism disrupts the dialectical unity between justice and interests and between the individual and the collective [5]. Therefore, "refinement" here does not

refer to sophistication in an aesthetic sense; rather, it denotes the sophistication and concealment of self-serving purposes in the choice of means and modes of expression.

Refined egoism must be distinguished from reasonable self-interest. Reasonable self-interest recognizes that individuals have legitimate interests and allows them to pursue personal development without infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of others or the public interest, while seeking mutual gains for individuals and society through reciprocal cooperation. Its adherence to rules is motivated not merely by a desire to avoid punishment but also by recognition of the value of fairness embodied in the rules themselves. Refined egoism is characterized by the way it often cloaks itself in the appearance of compliance, rationality, or even sociability, thereby skillfully avoiding direct conflict and moral condemnation. Through calculated and strategic behavior, it seeks to maximize personal gain, and such behavior tends to be strongly goal-oriented and outcome-oriented [6]. It instrumentalizes other people and the community and treats rules as external conditions to be selectively exploited: rules are invoked when they are advantageous, while loopholes are sought when they are not; collective interests are emphasized when others are expected to make sacrifices, whereas individual rights are absolutized when personal costs are involved. The boundary between the two therefore does not lie in whether individuals pursue their own interests, but in whether personal interests are absolutized, whether the means employed undermine fairness, and whether the same norms can be applied equally to oneself and others.

Accordingly, this study defines refined egoism among college students as a value orientation in which some college students, in their studies, interpersonal relationships, and participation in public affairs, adopt the maximization of personal interests as an underlying behavioral principle, engage in meticulous calculation and strategic action through the use of knowledge, rules, interpersonal relationships, and moral discourse, and obscure their one-sided self-serving purposes through expressions framed as compliant with rules and oriented toward the public good. It is a behavioral pattern that may be activated, reinforced, and gradually consolidated under particular circumstances.

Structurally, this definition encompasses three interrelated dimensions of judgment. The first concerns objectives: whether personal gain has evolved from a legitimate pursuit into the sole objective that overrides other values. The second concerns means: whether knowledge, institutions, and interpersonal relationships are instrumentalized solely to serve personal interests. The third concerns norms: whether individuals recognize that they and others are subject to the same principles. The pursuit of personal interests alone does not constitute refined egoism if the means employed do not undermine fairness. Likewise, the mere possession of sophisticated strategic skills does not constitute refined egoism if an individual continues to respect others and public rules. Refined egoism becomes particularly identifiable only when self-serving objectives, strategically sophisticated means, and inconsistent application of norms form a stable combination.

2.2. Major behavioral characteristics of refined egoism among college students

2.2.1. *The increasingly self-serving orientation of motivations*

The increasing self-serving orientation of motivations is the purposive characteristic of refined egoism. Some college students do not participate in academic activities or campus affairs primarily out of interest, responsibility, or shared needs. Instead, their first concern is whether an activity can provide academic credits, honors, recommendation opportunities, social connections, or résumé enhancement. Courses are classified as "useful" or "useless", social practice is reduced to supporting documentation, and positions in student organizations are regarded as gateways to resources. When an activity cannot generate an immediate and visible personal benefit, their willingness to invest declines rapidly; when collective tasks conflict with personal arrangements, public responsibility is often relegated to the lowest priority. Refined egoism presents

itself as active participation in collective affairs while maximizing personal interests within a framework of thoughts and goals that remains consistent or broadly similar to those of people around them. It is primarily manifested in an excessive pursuit of benefits and a pronounced opportunistic tendency [7]. There is nothing inherently wrong with college students being concerned about the benefits of activities. The problem arises when the assessment of benefits excludes intrinsic values such as the pursuit of knowledge, integrity, friendship, and responsibility, reducing the reasons for action to a single consideration of personal returns.

2.2.2. The increasingly sophisticated calculation of interests

Sophisticated calculation is manifested in the tendency of college students to transform learning, interpersonal interaction, and public participation into comparable input-output projects. Some students carefully calculate the difficulty of courses, instructors' grading practices, the probability of winning competitions, and the relationship between volunteer service hours and additional points in award evaluations, tending to select actions that require "little investment, produce quick results, and can be readily documented". Based on an analysis of 1,678 valid samples, scholar Zihan Gao summarized relevant manifestations in terms of high levels of both cognitive and emotional intelligence, deceptive self-interest, and opportunistic maneuvering [8]. This suggests that refined egoism does not necessarily exclude diligence; it may instead take the outward form of strong self-discipline and clearly defined goals. However, such diligence is governed by external indicators, and knowledge may easily be abandoned once it can no longer be converted into a competitive advantage. Calculation is an essential component of rational action. It becomes an excessive expansion of instrumental rationality only when it exceeds its appropriate boundaries and attempts to quantify values such as friendship, integrity, and public responsibility that cannot be fully reduced to measurable terms.

2.2.3. The increasing strategic orientation of behavior

The strategic orientation of behavior is the most direct outward manifestation of the "refinement" of refined egoism. Refined egoists are generally familiar with institutional procedures and are unlikely to openly violate rules. Instead, they may achieve their objectives through selective interpretation, borderline practices, and information asymmetries. For example, they may maintain a highly positive attitude toward individuals with evaluative authority or control over resource allocation while reducing their investment in relationships with those who cannot provide tangible benefits; in teamwork, they may compete for visible achievements while avoiding time-consuming foundational work that is difficult to document; and in award evaluations, they may prioritize collecting formal evidence rather than making sustained efforts to develop genuine capabilities. College student "refined egoists" are characterized by complexity and variability [9], transforming rules from shared norms into tools that can be exploited. Strategic competence can originally serve problem-solving, but when ends become detached from means and procedural compliance is treated as the entirety of moral legitimacy, rules lose their public significance as foundations for fair cooperation.

The strategic orientation of behavior is often accompanied by strong sensitivity to context. When confronted with different evaluative actors, refined egoists may quickly adjust their modes of expression and levels of investment. In the face of formal rules, they emphasize procedural texts; in informal relationships, they appeal instead to emotions, identities, or collective needs. On the surface, this may appear to reflect a strong capacity for social adaptation, but in substance it may indicate a lack of consistent value principles across different contexts. The key question is not whether students are capable of "flexible adaptation", but whether such adaptation remains constrained by principles of integrity, fairness, and non-harm. Education that merely requires students to follow rules mechanically cannot adequately address the complexity of real-world situations; however, treating every form of flexible maneuvering as a competence would likewise legitimize the instrumentalization of rules.

2.2.4. The justification of self-serving interests

The discursive justification of self-serving interests makes refined egoism particularly difficult to identify. Refined egoists do not openly declare that they "act only for themselves". Instead, they package personal interests in public-oriented discourse, using positive concepts such as collective honor, efficiency, procedural justice, and individual effort to justify their actions. When personal demands coincide with collective needs, active participation is presented as an expression of responsibility; when the two come into conflict, however, individual boundaries and freedom of choice are emphasized. The concept of egoism characterized by inconsistency in the application of behavioral standards across subjects reveals this structure: individuals expect others to comply with public norms that benefit them while reserving exceptions for themselves [2]. Social media further amplifies the possibilities for image management. The visibility of media platforms, attention-driven mechanisms, and low-cost dissemination may encourage individuals to carefully construct their public image and convert it into personal benefits [10]. In the campus context, such justificatory expression is often manifested in a strong concern with "visible contributions" while neglecting the fulfillment of responsibilities in situations where there is no external supervision.

3. Multifaceted impacts of refined egoism among college students

3.1. Short-term adaptive effects at the behavioral level and their limitations

The appeal of refined egoism lies partly in the fact that it does not always manifest itself as failure. In environments characterized by dense performance indicators, scarce opportunities, and readily comparable outcomes, students who have clear goals, are adept at calculation, and are familiar with rules may achieve relatively high short-term efficiency in their actions. First, an awareness of costs and benefits can help reduce ineffective investment and encourage students to formulate academic and career plans. Second, strategic competence can help students identify institutional information, coordinate resources, and safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. Third, an awareness of personal boundaries can help students reject unreasonable demands and prevent legitimate individual interests from being suppressed in the name of the collective.

However, such adaptability is conditional and short-lived. First, it depends on relatively stable and calculable evaluation criteria. Once students enter fields that require originality, long-term accumulation, and exploration under uncertainty, excessive calculation may instead constrain their willingness to experiment. Second, refined egoism is adept at producing visible indicators of achievement, but this does not necessarily translate into genuine competence; an impressive résumé cannot substitute for a well-structured body of knowledge, professional judgment, or personal maturity. Third, it incurs implicit costs in terms of trust and public resources. Although individuals may benefit temporarily, the environment for cooperation may gradually deteriorate. A comparison between the "excellent sheep" and "refined egoists" suggests that excessive competition in modern education may produce students with impressive résumés but limited independence and incomplete personalities [11]. Therefore, the so-called adaptive effect should be understood as a practical condition that facilitates the spread of the problem, rather than as a value-based endorsement of refined egoism.

The spread of refined egoism among college students also involves a clear interactive mechanism. When a small number of individuals gain advantages by embellishing application materials, monopolizing information, or selectively fulfilling their responsibilities, while evaluation systems fail to correct such behavior in a timely manner, other students may conclude that "those who follow the rules are the ones who suffer". Students who originally disapprove of such conduct may imitate it defensively, gradually transforming

individual strategies into group norms. Conversely, when institutions are capable of identifying genuine contributions, penalizing breaches of trust, and ensuring fair access to opportunities, the expected benefits of refined calculation will decline. This indicates that such effects are not simply the result of individual personality traits; rather, they arise from the mutual reinforcement of individual choices and the evaluative environment. Educational guidance must therefore address cognition, behavior, and incentive structures simultaneously.

3.2. Deep-seated shifts at the level of individual values

3.2.1. *The increasing instrumentalization of ideals and beliefs*

When the calculation of personal interests occupies the center of one's actions over an extended period, ideals and beliefs may gradually degenerate from value commitments that provide direction in life into rhetorical resources for securing practical opportunities. Students may become adept at using mainstream value discourse in public expressions without transforming it into stable internal convictions. When choosing a major, participating in organizations, or undertaking responsibilities, they may be more concerned with whether these activities can enhance their competitive advantages. Once ideals cannot be immediately converted into positions, income, or honors, they may be dismissed as unrealistic. The consequence is not simply that students become more "realistic"; rather, value rationality loses its ability to guide instrumental rationality, while the purpose of life comes to be defined in reverse by external evaluation. As can be seen from Erich Fromm's distinction between "having" and "being", an insufficient sense of an inner self may lead individuals to continually rely on external possessions to affirm their own sense of self [1]. Under such circumstances, the accumulation of awards, certificates, and social connections does not necessarily enhance a sense of security; instead, it may generate persistent anxiety arising from comparison. Thought shapes action, while action determines outcomes. When the value foundation of an individual's outward behavior becomes distorted, the soundness of the actions taken to address a given problem and the validity of the outcomes obtained become difficult to ensure [12].

3.2.2. *The increasing outcome orientation of standards for success and personal development*

Refined egoism places considerable emphasis on outcomes, but it can easily obscure how those outcomes are achieved and what social significance they carry. Academic performance, admission to postgraduate programs, employment, and income become the primary criteria for judging personal success, while the process of acquiring knowledge, professional ethics, the experience of labor, and contributions to society are relegated to secondary importance. The intensification of educational competition further reinforces this tendency. Limited access to high-quality resources encourages students to continually increase their investment of time and effort, while rules are repeatedly dissected and transformed into competitive techniques, and minor advantages are packaged as decisive differences. Refined egoism and secular utilitarianism tend to emerge alongside each other in irrational competition. An outcome-oriented standard can also lead to an overly simplistic attribution of failure. Students may easily interpret temporary setbacks as evidence of insufficient personal worth or attribute others' success to resources, connections, and strategies, thereby weakening their willingness to persist in their efforts and engage in collaborative learning.

3.2.3. *The increasing conditionality of moral choices*

When morality becomes incorporated into cost-benefit calculations, integrity, kindness, and responsibility may be observed only when compliance involves low costs or promises high returns. Whether an individual fulfills commitments in the absence of supervision and whether they assume responsibility when collective needs conflict with personal interests are important situations in which genuine value commitment can be tested. Refined egoists generally do not reject moral norms outright; instead, they selectively apply them according to

the people involved, the circumstances, and the consequences. They emphasize cooperation when dealing with those in stronger positions while reducing their obligations toward those in weaker positions; they display dedication in public while avoiding costs in private. Such conditionality can create a separation between cognition and action, causing moral education to remain at the level of "knowing the correct answer" rather than being transformed into stable patterns of behavior. Over time, individuals may also develop mechanisms of self-justification, interpreting each exception as something compelled by circumstances and gradually losing the capacity to reflect critically on the motivations underlying their own behavior.

3.3. Alienation of interpersonal relationships

3.3.1. The increasing treatment of interpersonal partners as resources

The resource-oriented treatment of interpersonal relationships is manifested in the tendency to determine the level of investment in a relationship according to the information, opportunities, evaluations, or social capital that the other person may provide. This short-sighted shift in interpersonal behavior leads individuals to focus excessively on personal gains and losses, while neglecting emotional bonds and shared well-being with others [13]. Teacher–student relationships may be reduced to relationships centered on grades and recommendations; classmates may be categorized as competitors, collaborators, or exploitable resources; and interactions within student organizations may revolve around enhancing one's résumé. An awareness of resources can facilitate social cooperation, but when people are reduced entirely to resources, interpersonal interactions lose equality, respect, and emotional authenticity. Once the other person is perceived as having "no further value", investment in the relationship may be withdrawn immediately, while individuals may also become isolated as a result of constantly guarding against being exploited. Refined egoism seeks to expand personal resources through the cultivation of interpersonal relationships, but at a deeper level, it undermines the trust necessary for those resources to be generated in the first place.

3.3.2. The increasing short-term orientation of cooperation

Stable cooperation requires delayed returns, a reasonable division of labor, and a basic expectation of goodwill from others. Refined egoists, however, tend to choose tasks through which their individual contributions can be quickly made visible, shift less visible forms of labor onto others, and emphasize their own input when results are distributed. In one-off competitions or short-term projects, such strategies may be temporarily effective. In long-term cooperation, however, team members gradually develop defensive behaviors, reduce unconditional assistance, compete for visible achievements, and shift from jointly solving problems to calculating their respective interests. The short-term orientation of cooperation not only reduces organizational efficiency but also makes it more difficult for college students to develop the civic capacities required for public life, such as negotiation, compromise, shared responsibility, and resource sharing.

3.3.3. The increasing strategic orientation of integrity

The strategic use of integrity does not necessarily manifest itself as overt deception. More often, it takes the form of minimal compliance with commitments and selective truthfulness. Refined egoists tend to remain accurate only where information is likely to be verified, fulfill promises to people who may continue to be useful to them, and honor agreements when the cost of breaking them exceeds the potential benefits. The danger of such behavior lies in the fact that, although it may appear compliant on the surface, it continuously erodes the moral foundations of trust. When students generally expect others to free-ride, embellish application materials, or appropriate credit for achievements, even those who are willing to cooperate may adopt self-protective strategies. Ultimately, this can produce a low-trust interpersonal environment characterized by "everyone guarding against everyone else, and no one trusting anyone".

3.4. The erosion of collective identity and public spirit

Universities are not merely providers of knowledge and degrees; they are also public spaces in which young people learn how to live together as members of a community. If college students regard the university merely as a platform for individual advancement, courses, organizations, honors, and social practice may all become instrumentalized. A university should not merely serve as a stepping stone for individual advancement or as an instrumental arena for fulfilling private desires. Rather, it should be an educational space that fosters the development of civic character. Civic character refers to the practical qualities through which a person manifests themselves as a human being in public life [14]. It is precisely this sense of community that refined egoism undermines. Public affairs may be neglected because they "do not add points" to an individual's record, collective participation may become centered on visible returns, and maintaining public order may be regarded as someone else's responsibility.

The weakening of public spirit can also alter the way campus institutions operate. When awards, student organizations, and practical programs become excessively dominated by competitive logic, students may become more inclined to study formal eligibility requirements than to engage with the educational value of the activities themselves. Information and opportunities may circulate within small social circles, while ordinary students' confidence in institutional fairness declines. Some students may shift from active competition to detached observation, believing that all expressions of values are merely forms of interest-based packaging. At this point, the influence of refined egoism is no longer confined to individuals. Through demonstration effects and countervailing incentives, it begins to reshape group norms: those who genuinely devote themselves to others become concerned about suffering losses, while those who follow the rules begin to question whether the rules are worth following. Public trust is consequently eroded.

If a university in practice rewards only achievements that can be ranked, while rhetorically demanding that students pursue holistic development and serve society, students will quickly perceive the gap between explicit educational advocacy and actual incentive structures and may consequently learn how to engage in dual forms of expression. Over time, education itself may become merely a model of "justificatory expression". Therefore, addressing refined egoism requires more than changing students. It also requires universities to reflect on whether their evaluation systems are consistent with their educational objectives, so that public values can move beyond slogans and become embedded in resource allocation, faculty evaluation, and everyday institutional governance.

4. Educational guidance strategies for addressing refined egoism among college students

4.1. Deepening value analysis and clarifying the boundary between reasonable self-interest and refined egoism

The first task of educational guidance is to address conceptual confusion. Classroom instruction and everyday education should neither equate "pursuing interests" with selfishness nor portray unconditional self-sacrifice as the only morally acceptable choice. Instead, they should acknowledge college students' legitimate needs concerning employment, personal development, dignity, and individual boundaries. The Marxist view of interests emphasizes the dialectical unity between individual and collective interests and between material needs and spiritual pursuits. Accordingly, students can be guided through cases involving conflicts of interest to consider whether their personal gains come at the unfair expense of others, whether the principles they invoke can be applied equally to themselves and others, and whether public institutions could continue to

function if everyone adopted the same course of action. Transforming abstract values into concrete and discussable criteria for judgment can help students recognize that "compliance does not necessarily mean legitimacy" and that "effectiveness does not necessarily mean value".

At the same time, educational guidance should avoid labeling. Refined egoism is a context-dependent value orientation; it should not be used to infer a person's character from isolated behaviors, let alone to characterize the entire college student population as utilitarian or selfish. Educators should pay attention to the competitive pressures, anxiety about failure, and sense of insecurity underlying students' behavior and encourage reflection through equal dialogue rather than moralistic admonition. Only when students feel that their legitimate individual interests are recognized are they more likely to understand that public responsibility is not a one-sided suppression of individual interests, but a shared condition that safeguards everyone's continued development.

4.2. Improving curriculum instruction and integrating value theory with real-life problems

Ideological and political theory courses and professional courses should jointly assume responsibility for value-oriented education. Ideological and political theory courses can develop teaching cases around real-life situations commonly encountered by college students, such as competition for awards, authorship in team projects, volunteer service, online expression, and career choices. Students can be guided to analyze the relationships among behavioral objectives, means of implementation, institutional rules, and actual consequences, thereby strengthening their capacity for value judgment and moral reasoning in complex situations. Through role reversal, discussions of moral dilemmas, and debates on public issues, educators can move beyond a learning model that focuses solely on memorizing concepts and reproducing predetermined conclusions, encouraging students to develop relatively stable value judgments through the exchange of perspectives and the weighing of competing interests. In response to the possibility that behavioral standards may be applied inconsistently across different actors, students can be asked to construct arguments from the perspectives of beneficiaries, those who bear the costs, rule enforcers, and institutional stakeholders. They can then be asked a further question: when their identities and positions of interest change, would they still be willing to accept the same behavioral standard? In this way, the question of whether "the same standard can be universally applied" becomes a concrete and testable classroom issue, helping students reduce double standards arising from changes in their positions while strengthening their awareness of rules, fairness, and public responsibility.

Professional education, meanwhile, should integrate professional ethics into the teaching of disciplinary knowledge. Medicine, engineering, education, journalism, management, and other fields all involve responsibilities toward other people and society. Teachers should therefore address not only efficiency and technical skills but also the public consequences of professional decision-making. Course assessment can incorporate long-term projects, collaborative tasks, and reflective writing, thereby reducing the extent to which students can obtain high grades simply by reproducing standard answers. University teachers should also maintain consistency in evaluation standards, transparency in resource allocation, and consistency between their words and actions, because educators' actual behavior shapes students' understanding of rules and public values more powerfully than abstract moral instruction.

4.3. Optimizing evaluation mechanisms and reducing the utilitarian incentives created by a single performance orientation

The emergence of refined egoistic behavior is influenced not only by values but also by institutional incentives. If scholarships, recommendations for postgraduate study, awards, and evaluations of student

leaders rely excessively on the number of certificates, activities, and easily packaged materials, students' strategic calculation of these indicators becomes a predictable response. Universities should therefore examine whether their indicators genuinely reflect educational objectives, reduce low-value quantitative evidence, and place greater emphasis on sustained commitment, genuine contributions, academic integrity, and the quality of cooperation. For team achievements, institutions should establish mechanisms for process documentation, peer assessment, and accountability so that foundational and service-oriented work can be recognized, thereby reducing incentives to "claim credit while avoiding responsibility".

Evaluation reform should also strengthen procedural fairness. Eligibility requirements, evaluation criteria, and channels for raising objections should be made transparent to prevent resources and opportunities from circulating exclusively within closed personal networks. For volunteer service and social practice, institutions should assess not only the number of hours completed but also feedback from service recipients, the quality of problem-solving, and students' reflections on their experiences. Evaluation indicators cannot—and should not—be eliminated entirely, nor should competition itself be rejected. However, institutions should avoid defining students' actual worth through a single ranking system. By establishing diverse pathways for development and incorporating formative assessment, universities can demonstrate to students that honest work, sustained effort, and contributions to the public good can receive institutional recognition just as legitimate forms of achievement.

At the technical level, evaluation can be divided into eligibility assessment, developmental assessment, and honors assessment. Eligibility assessment should focus on establishing minimum standards and verifying genuine compliance, thereby reducing meaningless accumulation of supporting materials. Developmental assessment should focus on documenting students' growth relative to their own starting points and allow different types of strengths to be recognized. Honors assessment should assign greater weight to public contributions, team feedback, and records of integrity. For qualities that are difficult to quantify, institutions should avoid simply creating another cumbersome point-based system. Instead, they can make well-informed judgments based on factual descriptions, representative cases, and evidence from multiple stakeholders. Such an approach can help avoid both an excessive emphasis on scores and the transformation of moral education into another arena for performative competition.

4.4. Strengthening practice-based education and cultivating public responsibility and a sense of community

Public spirit cannot be developed through the transmission of knowledge alone; it is learned and internalized through participation in genuine shared life. Public spirit, civic participation, and the capacity for cooperation constitute the core of public character education [15]. Universities can design sustained programs around community service, rural research, campus governance, peer support, and discipline-based volunteer service, enabling students to engage with real people, real needs, and real consequences. Compared with one-off activities undertaken merely for the sake of "checking a box", sustained service is more effective in helping students understand responsibility, reciprocity, and shared interests.

Practice-based education should avoid turning participation into another source of certificates and credentials. For the design of certain activity programs, reliance solely on duration and photographic evidence for assessment should be reduced, and a complete process of "needs identification–plan consultation–joint implementation–outcome feedback–reflection and improvement" should be established. Students should not only serve as task executors but also be involved in the formulation of rules and the evaluation of outcomes. Through collective decision-making, they can experience how individual demands enter public deliberation and understand that compromise does not necessarily mean suffering a loss, cooperation is not simply an

exchange of resources, and responsibility is not merely something imposed externally. Public practice can thus become an important setting for correcting excessive instrumental rationality, developing empathy, and fostering a sense of belonging to a community.

4.5. Cultivating interpersonal ethics and building a campus community based on integrity and mutual assistance

The campus community is not only the primary setting for college students' everyday interactions but also an important space in which values are tested through real relationships. Compared with the teaching of principles in the classroom, students are more likely to develop a practical understanding of integrity, fairness, and mutual assistance through concrete experiences involving peer cooperation, resource allocation, interest coordination, and conflict resolution. Universities should therefore integrate interpersonal ethics into everyday contexts such as class development, residential life, student organizations, and teamwork. By improving rules, fostering healthy relationships, and strengthening a sense of community responsibility, universities can reduce the space in which utilitarian relationships, instrumentalized cooperation, and strategic breaches of trust can thrive. In particular, students should be guided to properly balance individual development and the interests of others, as well as competitive aspirations and responsibilities toward cooperation. In this way, integrity becomes not merely a requirement of individual morality but also a predictable and consistently observed basic norm governing campus interactions.

Student organizations are important vehicles through which college students participate in campus public life and develop a sense of responsibility and the capacity for cooperation. The way these organizations operate can exert a subtle influence on students' values and interpersonal behavior. To prevent student organizations from becoming tools for a small number of students to accumulate social connections, obtain eligibility for awards, or embellish their résumés, universities should further clarify internal boundaries of authority and responsibility and improve mechanisms for the allocation of positions, deliberation, and oversight. On the one hand, the responsibilities and performance requirements associated with different positions should be clearly specified to prevent excessive concentration of authority, the absence of accountability, and a culture of "valuing titles over service". On the other hand, key positions involving resource allocation, project management, and award recommendations can be subject to regular rotation, allowing more students opportunities to participate in organizational management and public service. Information of widespread concern to students, including competition opportunities, practical projects, and training programs, should also be disclosed promptly and comprehensively, with application requirements and selection procedures clearly specified. This can reduce information asymmetry and prevent opportunities from circulating exclusively within closed networks of personal connections.

The digital campus also requires interpersonal ethics. Through media literacy education, teachers can help students recognize how image presentation, popularity-driven comparison, and narratives of success influence value judgments and understand that online expression is not only an individual right but also carries responsibilities for truthfulness, respect, and avoiding manipulation of others. When promoting exemplary students on official university platforms, institutions should reduce the reliance on one-dimensional narratives centered exclusively on awards, admission to prestigious universities, and "perfect résumés". Greater attention should instead be given to the sustained efforts, collaborative growth, and public contributions of ordinary students. Only when campus culture consistently recognizes authenticity, integrity, mutual assistance, and a sense of responsibility will students no longer need elaborate self-presentation to gain recognition.

Educational guidance should also be supported by a broader network of care and assistance. Counselors, faculty members, psychological counselors, and student leaders can establish referral and collaborative

mechanisms around academic pressure, competitive anxiety, and interpersonal conflicts. When strategic breaches of trust occur repeatedly, institutions should not only clarify the consequences of violating rules but also use individual conversations to help students identify the underlying sense of insecurity and erroneous patterns of attribution. For students who feel frustrated because they refuse to engage in excessive competition, universities should provide diverse development counseling and genuine opportunities for growth. Family education should likewise reduce the tendency to measure personal development solely through rankings, income, or affiliation with prestigious universities and avoid reinforcing the maxim that one must "never allow oneself to suffer a loss" as a general principle for dealing with others. Only through the joint participation of universities, families, and students can value-oriented education gain stable support in everyday life.

5. Conclusion

Refined egoism among college students is a value orientation characterized by the excessive expansion of the logic of personal interests and its strategic packaging through knowledge, rules, and discursive techniques. Identifying refined egoism should not be reduced to asking whether individuals pursue their own interests. Instead, it requires examining whether personal interests have been absolutized, whether behavioral standards can be applied consistently across different actors, and whether individual actions undermine the interests of others or the functioning of public institutions. Goal-oriented planning, cost awareness, strategic competence, and awareness of individual rights all have legitimate value. However, when detached from the guidance of positive value rationality, they may produce a combination of short-term adaptability and long-term alienation. Accordingly, universities should integrate value analysis, curriculum instruction, institutional evaluation, public practice, and interpersonal ethics, enabling students to understand the inherent compatibility between individual development and public responsibility through fair institutional arrangements and genuine participation in shared life. Ultimately, overcoming refined egoism does not mean eliminating the "self"; rather, it means enabling a closed and calculating self to develop into an autonomous subject capable of respecting others, assuming responsibility, and growing together with the community.

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