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English 109

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Being There, and Not / On Extracurriculars: The Importance
of On-Campus Togetherness

In her book “Remaking College,” Rebecca Chopp, the president of Swarthmore College, writes about three essential parts of the American liberal arts college: “critical thinking, moral and civil character, and using knowledge to improve the world” (Chopp 13). While there is no doubt that these three traits can be found all over Carleton, they are exemplified best in its extracurriculars. A main aspect of classes at Carleton focuses on these; however, the scope in which they can approach them is limited to tests, papers, and in-class activities that can only go so far. It is outside of the classroom where these skills are really put into practice. The importance of extracurriculars to Carleton students has never been clearer than now; during the current pandemic, nearly every school in the nation was faced with the challenge of moving their curriculum online, while still trying to replicate the on-campus experience of college as closely as possible. The academic side of Carleton has remained surprisingly stable, thanks to the school's talented professors, but the lack of activities outside the classroom is felt sorely by its students. With more than 200 student organizations alongside a wide array of varsity athletics, extracurriculars represent a huge part of the Carleton experience, and unlike classes, are nearly impossible to replicate at home. This huge disconnect between how classes feel at home and on campus proves one larger point: if Carleton and other liberal arts colleges cannot promise their

students that extracurriculars will return in full, then perhaps it is not worth returning to campuses.

Virtually any Carleton student can speak about a student organization, team, or club they are a part of, but for first year Ben Levine, one extracurricular activity stands out. Carleton's varsity football team has had (and will have) a huge impact on his time at the school. Ben only found out about Carleton through a text from the head coach. His first experience of the campus was a tour of Laird stadium, and the first student he met was a future teammate of his. This influence remained on Ben when he arrived on campus, and the month-long training camp in August ensured him that he would enter New Student Week with 60 close friends of every grade. He could experience all of the Carleton firsts with the other freshmen, while also knowing there were 15 upperclassmen more than willing to answer any questions they had. The football team gave Ben a built-in study group for many of his classes, forced him to exercise all term (even during finals week!), and made sure he had a structure and schedule for every week. More than anything though, football opened him up to the great parts of Carleton. Also, first-year student Indigo Bistrup-Peterson had a very different, but in many ways similar experience with extracurriculars. One of the first things she knew about Carleton College was that they had a K-Pop dance club, something that she is deeply passionate about. That club was one of the things she was most excited about after she was accepted. She was nervous to join of course, but during the first meeting she realized that these people were going to be her friends for the rest of her college career, and she was happy beyond belief. Dancing together is different than dancing by yourself, and though their moves might not always be perfect, she's so happy to be included in such a warm and inviting environment.

Beyond one or two students' personal experiences, many would agree that the benefits of extracurriculars are vital to a full college experience. Using Chopp's three core values only makes this clearer; while critical thinking can be found in every Carleton classroom, her other two values become more specific to extracurriculars. For one, student organizations and clubs are the main outlets where students at Carleton use knowledge from their classes to actively "improve the world." This could vary from the football team volunteering at a food bank, to the choir bringing art and music into the lives of all who attend. Carleton's clubs and activities are perhaps the most irreplaceable in the context of the cultivation of moral and civil character. More than any of Chopp's traits, these are the hardest to teach or reinforce in the classroom. Qualities like leadership, accountability, and a sense of community are imperative to student organizations- especially team sports. Chopp even acknowledges this in her writing, stating "Athletics, arts, as well as political, activist, and cultural groups on campus have a powerful impact on students and serve as vehicles for individual and communal development" (Chopp 14).

Zoom or any other type of technology cannot be used as a substitute for the extracurricular experience because it completely gets rid of the feeling of unity and teamwork that are highly important within clubs and sports. Part of what makes an on-campus college experience so special is being able to be close to friends and other group members. When Indigo is singing with the Carleton Choir, she feels a sense of happiness and excitement when they are doing well, and she also feels disappointment (and sometimes irritation) when the piece isn't working as planned. But even through those rough patches, she knows that she can trust her team to pull everything together in time for the performance. That performance is made even more rewarding by going through those hardships and days where it seems like the choir gets nothing done.

Along with eliminating the “team” aspect of clubs and sports, many extracurricular activities are unable to be done over Zoom or FaceTime or SMS. Students would not be able to volunteer for others or be able to personally help those in need or “better the world” in any other way other than donations. Carls are notoriously overachieving, and therefore many students are involved in multiple activities like these. As members of both artistic clubs and sports teams, Indigo and Ben feel that they have an inside view as to what these clubs are like. A dance club, for instance, cannot function as an online club. The intensity, the music, the movement, it’s all erased when personal interactions between our group members are erased. The same goes for football as well. Nothing can replicate the feeling of working together as a team or winning the game by just a few hard-earned points. How are Carleton students supposed partake in these activities while being separated from all bodily contact?

Not only are extracurriculars difficult to replicate online, but regular classes are as well. James Lang, an English professor at Assumption College in Massachusetts, makes the point that the reason Zoom classes may not be working well for students is because professors have had to hustle to get *something* online in order for their students to learn. For many this meant scrambling to collect relevant documents and put them online, changing assignments that just weren’t going to be possible in an online setting, and learning how to use an entirely new database. He says that “we should hardly expect satisfaction with online teaching this spring semester, given that our transition to it was so rushed,” and that is true (Lang). Online schooling is obviously preferable to no school at all, and many college students take the online route because they are unable to get an education otherwise. Online courses can be great and a very effective way of learning, however, those classes have been specially designed for online use since the beginning of their creation for students to access all around the world. Professors have

been doing their very best to accommodate for these trying times, and if given more time they will certainly create great courses online, but it will take time. Will student-run organizations and clubs be able to create an online presence as useful as these classes? Some might be able to, but as discussed above, not all clubs or sports are able to be replicated online, which leaves a gaping hole in the hearts of many Carleton students.

There are many ways that Carls can still partake in extracurriculars during this global pandemic that are still helpful for maintaining the feeling of college community and unity. For many clubs such as Off the Cuff, a storytelling club, not much has changed. Indigo still attends weekly meetings with the other group members where they discuss their stories and develop them, and the only real change is that they will not be able to perform them this term. Even dance clubs and sports teams are still meeting up, though they are unable to do real club activities together. Just being able to see each other in a time like this makes this life of seclusion bearable. However, using Zoom or other technology is not feasible for the long term. We are still able to interact with our teammates or other group members, which is incredibly important during this time of loneliness and uncertainty. We can still have club meetings and discuss plans for the future or even play online games with our group members. But for athletic teams, music groups, and theater troupes, it is virtually impossible to get anything done.

If Carleton students are unable to continue to be a part of their extracurriculars because of new regulations for on-campus living, it is not worth being brought back to campus. Those that have paid the tuition to attend Carleton College do not want to compromise a fundamental aspect of why students enjoy attending Carleton as an on-campus school. The large expenses that students pay for room and board, meals, and many other things that are necessary for an on-campus education don't seem worth the trouble if extracurriculars will be unavailable or

modified. Through these activities we build characteristics that we take into our lives outside of Carleton, the most prominent being the improvement of not only the world, but ourselves as well. They allow us to explore the world in ways that we are not able to in a classroom setting. And these activities, for Carls, are irreplaceable.

Works Cited

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