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Being There, And Not: The Fall from Equality in Higher Learning

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ENGL109

Professor Peter Balaam

Being There, and Not: The Fall from Equality in Higher Learning

For many, going to college like Carleton is an amazing opportunity regardless of their financial status. One New York Times article explains small liberal arts colleges often pride themselves as, “being the great equalizer” by offering students the chance to receive the same education regardless of financial status. Besides covering the basic needs of the students, the chance to live on campus gives students access to additional resources at a reduced cost or for free. With this amazing system, when students are on campus during a normal school year, everyone is essentially on a level playing field. However, after the coronavirus, life changed dramatically for college students who once “ate the same cafeteria food in the morning and bunked in the same creaky beds at night (Casey).” When we are off campus, we no longer have the opportunity to share the same resources that Carleton provides all of its students. The loss of Carleton's on campus resources disconnects Carls from their community by eliminating the illusion of equality that residential life at Carleton creates. This illusion is important because it allows us to focus more on being Carls and less on the disadvantages that make it harder for some students to succeed.

We, the writers of this piece, James Berger and Jenni Diaz, brought fairly different experiences to the table. For a student like James Berger, coming home may have been annoying, but not stressful. He has always been expected to go to college and succeed in it. When he returned home, he didn't need to worry about additional expenses that came from losing the

resources Carleton provided. He was just expected to get through this term and pass his classes. For Jenni Diaz, things looked drastically different. As a first-generation sophomore, Carleton College was the first step in creating a better life than those of her Mexican immigrant parents. She was one of 5 children that the family was determined to get through college. Even before the pandemic hit, her father was working two jobs to make rent, and her mother had a job in fast food for additional expenses. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, school closures, stay-at-home orders and extra responsibilities at home made it hard for Jenni to determine how she was supposed to be able to focus on remote learning.

Off campus, it becomes more transparent that some of Carleton's resources work as supplementary support for some but are completely necessary for others. One resource is a google document titled "Being not Rich at Carleton." This 26-page document is sent out to low income students by other students. The information sheet provides a list of resources that range from mental health support to various means of acquiring extra money for students who are not as wealthy as some of their peers. The mission of the document claims,

"As low- and middle-income students, we want to pass on our knowledge and tricks of the trade to the next generations of Carls. Not-rich people have to consider how much things cost and, to varying degrees, how to get the resources they need. This guide is intended to assist them in making informed decisions."

Without the additional help provided on campus, things look drastically different for students who benefited from the extra resources, and Carleton students acknowledge this. When advocating for a pass/fail term, one student explained that, "Act one: there are students for whom completing a full course load while not having the food and housing security Carleton offers is an impossible task. Fact two: there are other students for whom completing a full course load

while not at Carleton is not an issue, because they have food and housing security already.” Many of the students on the forum condemned the actions of students who did not think of other Carleton students' needs, with one student quoting another students' words and writing in response, “Shame on you for being a Carl...How about incorporating your privilege into your selfish consideration: Not every Carl could stay on campus and have access to all the facilities like Libe. Do you think it's fair for them, who paid the same tuition, to study the same class and compete with you in a worse studying environment?” This illusion of equality on a Carleton College campus, the idea that everyone has just what they need, makes it easier for students to focus less on their financial background and more on their college community. However, remote learning has revealed that there is a clear difference in advantages that some students have over others.

An additional resource that students lose is the equal playing field to participate in their activities and student organizations that, on a regular basis, positively impact the students' education. In James's case, missing the second half of his golf season has had a large impact on him because it is such a big part of his life. He was expecting to be able to play in many tournaments and even get to go to Panama for spring break. James has always used golf as a destressor and the lack of playing has made him very anxious and antsy to get out of his house and less motivated to do his work. However, James is fortunate enough to have the ability to participate in his activity even just a little bit as restrictions begin to ease up. For not-rich students like Jenni who have extra responsibilities at home, Carleton is the only place they have the time to be a part of extracurriculars. On campus, a Carleton schedule is more predictable and flexible whereas home life responsibilities like taking care of siblings and grocery shopping are hard to plan out. Limited access to these club activities can cause negative impacts on students'

stress levels or mental health. So, while some students can still benefit at least a little from the effects of participating in campus activities other students do not have as much of an advantage.

On campus, Carleton students are able to focus primarily on being a Carl, whereas at home, students are forced to worry about other responsibilities with little space to take care of their educational needs. For students like Tatiana Laithon at Haverford, a college similar to Carleton, college gave her the opportunity to worry about things like lacrosse, whereas when she's at home, she is responsible for helping her parents run their food truck. One of Laithon's professors explained an instance where, "As the lacrosse players gathered up for a video conference Ms. Lathion arrived late; she'd spent the day on what she called a 'scavenger hunt' to find what remaining meat was still available for the truck at grocery stores." Students like Jenni at Carleton are put in similar positions. If she wants extra school materials to help her succeed in college, it has to come out of her own savings, savings that could be used for family necessities. If she wants to study for longer periods of time, she has to worry about the increased use of electricity and how that will impact the light bill her family pays. She's never had to worry about those things on a Carleton campus because, regardless of the many resources she used, tuition had already covered many of those expenses which created an illusion of equal opportunity. Now, Carleton students are still expected to prioritize their education, but many times that responsibility is outweighed by responsibilities at home. These extra responsibilities further the inequality gap among Carleton students.

Part of the reason that this equality bubble is important on a college campus is because it allows students to focus more on the educational opportunities they are all given instead of focusing on disadvantages that make them different. When deciding whether or not there should be a mandatory pass/fail term, one Carleton student wrote that, "It's hard for me to see the

advantage of Option B (a pass/fail term) because I have not been dramatically affected by the pandemic, and I haven't talked to anyone who has been.” This student acknowledges that, usually, Carleton takes us out of this comfortable bubble we live in at home and introduces us to a bubble where inequalities are not as apparent. Now, Zoom sessions put us in positions where we can only focus on the professor instead of ourselves and other students. For a college that advocates a “diverse residential community and extensive international engagements,” not being able to interact with one another face-to-face makes it hard to care about each other's needs because we are not seeing the struggles firsthand. As a freshman, James was looking forward to engaging with his community and meeting many new people at the cool events that always occur in the spring like Sproncert and Rot Blatt. Not being able to attend these events to socialize makes it feel like the opportunity to meet others unlike himself was taken from his first year at a college. When we are off campus, it is as Anita Issacs explains, “It’s as though you had a front-row view on American inequality and the ways in which it was disguised and papered over.” This new focus on other students’ learning environment has caused a disconnect in what it means to have an equal opportunity to be a part of the Carleton community.

Small liberal arts colleges like Carleton aim to create a diverse community in which every student is a valued member of the community, regardless of background. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that when students are off campus, it becomes harder for them to consider themselves a part of one community, especially when it becomes obvious that some Carleton students are more disadvantaged than others. Without this great equalizer that we enjoy on campus, many Carls find it hard to identify with other Carls, furthering a divide that Carleton attempts to diminish during a regular term on campus. Without this sense of community to support Carls during the ongoing crisis, the things that make the college experience positive

are forced into the background. During this crisis, the attitude behind the “Carls help Carls” motto of Carleton College feels disconnected as the inequalities among students are more apparent than ever before.

Works Cited

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