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Being There, and Not:

The Reality of a Carleton Education During COVID-19

November 17, 2019 was a day full of global events. In the United States alone, new transcripts relating to President Trump's call with the President of Ukraine encouraging him to investigate Vice President Biden's son were released, Mayor Pete Buttigieg's poll numbers in Iowa were surging, and Congress was continuing an "impeachment probe" investigating President Trump. November 17 was also the day of the first appearance of a new novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China. Two months later, on January 30, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a Global Health emergency, declaring a pandemic and giving the new virus a name, COVID-19. In March, winter term at Carleton College came to a chaotic and dysfunctional end. After the decision to make Spring term at least partially online (later deciding to make the whole term online), Carleton extended spring break an extra week to accommodate teachers who had to restructure their courses for online learning. Since the transition to online classes, we have lost much of what made a Carleton education so special. Additionally, this transformation, one of in-person learning to one on a computer screen, has made learning more difficult and has slowed the academic, social and societal development of students.

In her article "Remaking, Renewing, Reimagining", Rebecca Chopp makes the argument that a liberal arts college (LAC) education, such as the one provided by

Carleton, encourages critical thinking, character development, and usage of knowledge to improve the world. Like a puzzle, a liberal arts college is dependent on the connection of all of the pieces and without one, education, the picture, is incomplete. In its mission statement, Carleton promotes the importance of community: "Carleton strives to be a collaborative community that encourages curiosity and intellectual adventure of the highest quality." The dynamic of the Carleton community, while students are on campus, is that we challenge each other and we learn from each other. This learning and challenging happens all over campus, not only in the classroom, lab or studio. Chopp notes that in a liberal arts college, "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" (14). As students of a liberal arts education, our schools are structured around this idea of collaboration and working together. At home, we still are expected to finish our school work and if we're athletes, stay in shape but at home we no longer have the opportunity to work, learn, grow and collaborate with fellow students and teammates. In order to have a liberal arts experience, the social and academic collaboration that students experience while on campus is necessary. However, currently with students miles from campus and each other, this sense of community is almost lost. Students don't have the opportunity to collaborate with each other and learn from one another like we once had. As the virus has forced us out of dorms, we have lost the ability for such robust socialization that spurs character development and community building through challenging our opinions.

Our independence has been taken away along with our sense of community. Normally living at a residential college, like Carleton, or any college really, students

usually get to experience a “choose your own adventure” book. When you’re away at school, parents can no longer give you curfews or different house rules that you need to follow. You become responsible for yourself, and you become your own person. With the expulsion of students from campus, college has turned into a glorified high school. The material might be more difficult, the professors more enticed to challenge students, and the school days might be shorter but the feeling one gets from learning at home is the same. Day after day the same distractions and family problems arise. Some days finding quiet places to work (where you can’t hear a parent also on Zoom conference calls) is extremely difficult. Things you had once done without thinking, like finding a quiet space to sit, now consume more time, thus substantially increasing the amount of time it takes to finish an assignment. Additionally, staying up late to work, a common trait among Carleton students, is more difficult as parents or siblings fall asleep early leaving only the feeling of loneliness that drives a quick look to the phone for some dopamine but eventually turns into a Netflix binge. At Carleton, you could go to 1st floor Libe and even though there would be complete silence, being able to see others working to finish whatever assignment was looming brought some feeling of community that pushed us to work harder. All of us students pushed from the campus many call home, no longer are we adults in a common space all communicating and learning together. Home learning has put the parental nagging back into our lives, pushing us to lose what made college so amazing: independence.

Part of the Carleton community includes the community built when a student is a part of a sports team or different clubs. Whether a part of a varsity sport or a club team or an environmental group, students find friends within that team or group of people.

While at Carleton, sports teams host events, parties, socials, movie nights, whatever. When the teams are not together and not at Carleton, that part of team bonding, team building and community is lost. However, some sports teams at Carleton are doing the best they can to try to maintain that level of community and team while not at campus. For example, the women's swim team has been doing Zoom workouts three times a week as well as team meetings. These group congregations not only allow the team to stay in shape but also help them stay in touch with one another and welcome the incoming first years to the team. However, not all Carleton teams have been working as hard to stay in touch with one another. CUT, one of the Frisbee teams at Carleton, has not been reaching out so frequently. As opposed to doing Zoom workouts together, team members are sent various workouts to do at home. The community that was once felt at Carleton within CUT, has slowly seemed to disappear.

Although the college administration has advertised to the student body that this “digital” term is just as much Carleton as a regular term, the digital experience is not a Carleton experience. Zoom has allowed students to have lectures and work in groups. However, the extracurriculars that average students are missing out on are detrimental for the development of students. A liberal arts college can no longer provide a rich education for students in a quarantined world. Student organizations are trying their best to stay a place for students to connect, but is a Zoom session really the equivalent to face-to-face interaction? No. As spring term comes to a close and concerns about fall term rise, more conversations regarding the impact of COVID-19 on a Carleton education need to be discussed. If fall term is online, will people be willing to pay full tuition to a program that is not a true Carleton experience? How will students connect

better with their peers in a world that seems pulling apart at the seams? How will families cope with financial difficulties during this time as college tuition continues to rise? These are the questions that are being asked and will continue to be asked until real solutions are found. In the current state of the world the future is uncertain, but at the end of the day we are still all students and must take in what we can in this ever-changing world.

Citations

Chopp, Rebecca. "Remaking, Renewing, Reimagining." *Remaking College*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, pp. 13–24.

"Campus Handbook." *Our Mission | Campus Handbook | Carleton College*, 8 Aug. 2019, apps.carleton.edu/handbook/governance/?policy_id=864117.