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ENGL 109: Intro to Rhetoric

May 27, 2020

The Importance of Community: A Student Account of Living Through a Pandemic

The president of Swarthmore College, Rebecca S. Chopp, provides three defining principles for a residential liberal arts college: “critical thinking, moral and civic character, and using knowledge to improve the world.” Her idea suggests that a college like this is defined not only by its academic education, but also an element of education that will help the students learn about life in general and prepare for difficulties ahead as a result of living in such a communal environment. The major difference between traditional and liberal arts education that provides this advantage in life is the community that students and professors form together on small campuses such as Carleton. However, being quarantined and separated from the community defeats the purpose of these institutions.

Throughout its 154 years of existence, the evolving student body and faculty members of Carleton have together built this community aimed towards the goal of producing global citizens. As first year students, with only two terms on campus under our belt, we can attest to the power and effectiveness of these efforts. We were struck by the kindness of the community that pulls everyone together, and the inner passion that drives it steadily forward. There is a sense of something unique and deeply powerful at work on campus. However, in the current state of the world, with a catastrophic pandemic forcing the closure of Carleton’s campus, this critical element of a liberal arts education is gone. Although some academies of higher education are

finding success in online learning, the magic of residential learning is lost. Without a physical, in person community, Carleton College can provide only a shadow of its former level of education.

This reflection on and appreciation for life on campus is not fully derived from being there — in fact it comes in large from not being there. Professor James M. Lang writes in *The Chronicles of Higher Education* that a common sentiment among his students is reflected in one student's comment, "I never thought I would say this, but I miss being in class. It's just not the same online." This simple point can be quite profound when felt for the first time. Before the pandemic, we took for granted the things that made us want to come to Carleton in the first place. Oftentimes we were complaining about the intense workload, bad food, impending deadlines, and lack of sleep. When it is taken away from us, we can finally fully understand the beauty of being on campus — the arboretum, the beautiful nature, the buildings, and the simple but immensely meaningful gift of spending time in those places with the people we had grown to love. This built-up potential energy of longing to be back on campus will pay off greatly, but only when we return.

It would be a lie to say that being removed from campus has been an entirely negative experience. The break from in person learning has provided us with a reprieve from the stress that comes with Carleton's intense academic demands. Since online classes have been designated as pass/fail, we can prioritize our wellbeing. We do not have to spend all of our energy on academic work in order to get the grades we want. We can exercise, sleep, and explore activities or interests that we previously had not had the time to pursue. We actually have the ability to learn for the sake of learning and not worry about grades or GPAs.

In spite of these benefits of being away from campus, they fail to outweigh the disadvantages — the key elements that give Carleton its magic are lacking. As Chopp makes clear, a liberal arts education is much more than lectures; it is a social group that essentially teaches how to live in a community. Everything is communal on campus. We eat together, exercise together, learn together, and live together. This structure teaches those involved how to problem solve in social situations and find a common ground on disputed issues. Carleton is so small that if you have a disagreement, you are forced to resolve it with that person because you will inevitably end up seeing them in class, at the dining hall, in the gym, or at social gatherings.

This tight community forces cooperation among students and faculty. Chopp aligns this small community building with the greater idea that knits our country together: democracy. “Contemporary residential liberal arts colleges not only offer ‘community’ as the environment for learning,” she says, “but they do so by creating bold cultural experiments, some utopian in nature, of how to live out democracy and educate leaders. Our liberal arts residential communities serve as incubators or pilots of new ways to link knowledge, freedom, and democracy on a global stage.” The values gained from an education such as this are central to why we chose Carleton as the place to live and learn for these four critical years of our life, and it is these particular values that are stripped away when learning online. This is because much of this education comes from the environment and not from classes. In this environment, our ideas are challenged by peers that have grown up all around the world, inspiring us to think critically about our own beliefs. Today, this separation from the community removes our need to learn how to cooperate. We are cut off from our peers and the opportunities to grow that go along with residential college communities.

In fact, the idea of residential communities as a central part of liberal arts colleges has been critical to their functionality since their very conception in the late 1600s. Professor of Art History, Carla Yanni, believes that, in the absence of a state religion, the architecture of college campuses were built to be safe havens for students to develop good morals and virtues:

“Educators wanted some distance between their students and the vice-filled city... The fixation on college as a means of didactic character forming was embedded in America’s religious landscape: without a state religion, each denomination used institutions of higher learning to imprint its specific morality upon its followers. This moral guidance was easier to transmit if the students lived on campus with the faculty.”

Although somewhat dated, this idea of moral education is still central to the liberal arts community. Campuses are places for young people to experiment and learn together in a safe environment. Without campuses, college communities cannot function as moral educators for young people around the country.

Apart from these ideas about democracy and morals, residential college communities also provide powerful and unique ways of connecting with people. As first years, we are still in the development phase of building our own communities within the larger one, so this abrupt cut off has prevented us from forming new and stronger social connections. The feeling of loneliness that comes with being in a new environment with strangers was just starting to fade away when the pandemic forced us to retreat to our old high school homes across the world. Of course we can Facetime or Zoom each other, but it is not the same as pulling all-nighters in the student union together, or talking over a meal, or hanging around in our dorms. It’s not the same as the genuine, human connection that is so prevalent at school.

Even though online education is necessary at the moment to protect members of the community, it has been difficult to not be a part of it. This situation has given us the opportunity to reflect on what we appreciated about life on campus and take care of ourselves, but it is by no means a long term solution. Over time, the lack of true social interactions begins to throw off the balance of intentional community and rigorous academics. Carleton College is a mere shadow of itself in this era of quarantine. Without a physical community, we miss out on a large portion of our education — there is no space or need for the personal growth that comes with living together. A liberal arts college is designed to facilitate this community and growth. When someone chooses to go to a small liberal arts school, they do so because they want to have connections with their professors and peers, they want to be a part of a community. But, if we are not together, then that community is nonexistent.

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