

LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION AND ONLINE LEARNING:  
PRACTICES, PROSPECTS, AND LIMITS

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## ABSTRACT

### LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION AND ONLINE LEARNING: PRACTICES, PROSPECTS, AND LIMITS

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Recent massive growth in online learning and the proliferation of new digital tools have changed the landscape of teaching and learning in higher education. Enrollment in online learning has continued to grow despite disagreement and uncertainty regarding its educational value. It is likely that online learning will have a differentiated impact on the various institution types and sectors within the larger system of higher education in United States. This study focuses on a sector of education that is highly valuable and increasingly vulnerable: liberal arts education. Despite a strong record of offering robust undergraduate education, some liberal arts colleges are beginning to move some of their essential core courses online, potentially undermining the quality of education. This study employed an embedded case study design to examine how key stakeholder groups at a liberal arts college perceived the degree of compatibility between traditional liberal arts education and online learning. By interviewing key stakeholder groups of a liberal arts college, this study uncovered key issues, tensions, and trade-offs related to moving the core courses of a traditional liberal education, such as literature, philosophy, and history to online formats.

The consensus between stakeholder groups in this study was that a traditional liberal arts education is not compatible with a fully online degree. Simply put, every stakeholder group agreed that moving a degree entirely online would undermine the essential nature and core purposes of a liberal arts education. Administrators believed that an all online liberal arts education would undermine essential elements of liberal arts education, such as student

vocational discernment, community life, and interactive learning. Faculty participants said that a purely online degree would undermine each of the essential elements of liberal arts education identified by faculty participants: a) multi-disciplinary approach, b) liberal arts skills, c) embodied learning, d) faculty to student interaction, and e) student to student interaction. According to the faculty, the essential nature of liberal arts education is embodied learning that addresses the whole person; mind, body, heart, and spirit. In order to achieve truly embodied learning, full human bodies must be physically present together. Students believed online learning was less personal, and that it would undermine the opportunity to develop close relationships and to pursue wholistic formation.

Although each stakeholder group expressed ways in which online learning would undermine liberal arts education, there was also openness to online learning. Administrators said that incorporating a limited number of online courses would not undermine liberal arts education. Faculty expressed optimism that hybrid formats could leverage the best of online and face to face formats in ways that could truly improve liberal arts education. By providing the right mix of experiences, instructors could take advantage of the unique opportunities in both online environments and face to face settings. According to the participants in this study, online learning has the potential to seriously undermine long-held and valuable features of liberal arts education. At the same time, each stakeholder group identified ways that online and hybrid learning might be incorporated in ways that are compatible with the essential nature and core purposes of liberal arts education.

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Dedicated to Aimee, Eleanor, and Juliet for their sacrifice and support.

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## INTRODUCTION

English professor Lionel Basney died in a drowning accident off the coast of Virginia while on vacation with his family in 1999. In the months following Basney's passing, his wife found one of his unpublished manuscripts, which was later published in an essay entitled *Teacher: Eleven Notes* (Basney, 2002). Together, these notes comprise a set of insightful reflections on the life of a teaching faculty member. Basney writes with the authority of one who has spent decades navigating the life of an academic. His strong commitment to teaching is evident in his writing. Basney cuts through the noise of academia as he describes the process of "weeding out" his old syllabi, lecture notes, books, and personal items in his office as he approaches the end of his career. Through this process, he seems to be wrestling with the question of what has mattered most in his career. From his writing, we can see that he hoped he had made a difference in the lives of his students. Basney describes the way in which he went about his teaching:

The basic equipment for a teacher is essentially the same as for a stand-up comedian: a striking voice, a direct gaze, and an inner freedom to say more or less anything that comes to mind. Also useful is a thick mental deposit of miscellaneous information: anecdotes, publication dates and other historical clutter, phrases from songs, the names and saleable features of recent movie figures all stick involuntarily in my mind and are subject to random, improvisatory recall.

What you do with this equipment depends, of course, on whether you can remain intellectually and emotionally open, vital. Since the time I took the required degrees and was, in this way, licensed to practice, I have read a great deal, partly because I love the English language and the things made of it, and partly because the habit of formal discourse was implanted in me very young. Criticism has flavors as poetry does. But I doubt if a large body of systematic knowledge is of much use to a teacher or undergraduates. Changes of critical or pedagogical method provide topics for conferences, but I doubt if students are cumulatively much better (or worse) readers and writers than they ever were.

*That* isn't what's going on in the classroom.

What's going on is partly waiting. You talk with and to students, waiting for the moment of intellectual shock, or fear, (more rarely) love, that means something has found its way in, or been allowed in, though the significance of this is the student's to state, and may not be evident for years. This is, mind you, *intellectual* fear or love – but the exact relation or interchange between thought and feeling is impossible to state...

Yet *there are people present*: a complicated hermeneutic, private and public, is being carried on, in which the text you are discussing is only a knot, or an occasion. And the results of the hermeneutic practice are always in code.

(Basney, 2002, p. 80-81)

To Basney, teaching and learning is both an intellectual and emotional experience. This process requires one to remain “intellectually and emotionally open” while waiting for deep learning to take root. In the physical presence of others, Basney waits for the moment where intellectual shock, fear, or love is ‘allowed in’ by students. Here, and in other passages of *Eleven Notes*, Basney uses an inherently emotional, even existential description of learning that is elusive to observe or measure. In other words, Basney acknowledges that learning does not necessarily happen at a particular perceptible or measureable point in time. Instead, experiences of deep learning in the classroom might slowly rise to the surface of one's awareness over the course of years. Basney's retrospective essay is itself an example of how one continues to reinterpret previous learning from the changed perspective that only time and more life experience can provide.

I have opened the discussion in this dissertation by invoking Basney's story and reflections because I studied the kind of learning that he is trying to describe: deeply personal, emotional, and existential learning that “sticks” with someone long after the final exams have been graded. Basney's writing reflects the heart and mind of a faculty member committed to the ideal of transformative liberal arts education. But Basney is an appropriate character to introduce here at the beginning of this dissertation for another reason. Basney critiqued the conventional

wisdom of the 1990's that technological advances were "progress." He keenly criticized the emotional and environmental damage that can result from unbridled, technology-driven capitalistic, consumerism. For example, in his article titled *Questioning Progress*, Basney (1998) lamented Bill Gates' comments in a 1995 interview where Gates envisioned "friction-free capitalism" where someday everyone would have a "wallet PC" that would grease the gears of global consumerism. Where Gates saw inevitable "progress," Basney envisioned "regress" and wondered if the earth could absorb such technology-accelerate consumerism.

In the late 1990's Basney posited that the "basic equipment" for teaching and learning had remained essentially the same. However the emergence of the Digital Age in subsequent decades has challenged this assumption. The "complicated public and private hermeneutic" of the face-to-face classroom that Basney described has expanded to an increasingly complicated public, private, and digital hermeneutic of online learning. In the world of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning in higher education, some see evidence of "progress" facilitated by digital technology where others see "regress."

This study examined the relationship between two distinct concepts: a) "traditional" liberal arts education and b) online learning. More specifically, I was curious about the degree of perceived compatibility between a traditional liberal arts education and online learning. In more evocative terms, I hoped to discover what people think will happen if the "soul" of a liberal arts education moves online.

One challenge in this study is the ambiguity and difficulty in defining terms such as online learning or traditional liberal arts education. For example, online learning is an umbrella term that includes a range of instructional practices that can be synchronous or asynchronous. Within these two basic categories, there are many ways for students and teachers to interact with

each other and course content online. Therefore, in the literature review portion of this dissertation, I introduce Terry Anderson's model of online learning. Anderson's model helps to define the various modes of interactions that can occur online.

Defining what constitutes a traditional liberal arts education is equally problematic, given the ways that liberal arts education has changed over the centuries. Because of this, I dedicate considerable space in Chapter 2 to define a traditional understanding of liberal arts education. As the literature review demonstrates, the idea of a traditional liberal arts education is rich and multi-faceted. Therefore, the concept of elasticity is a useful metaphor for thinking about a definition for traditional liberal arts education because this definition has stretched over time while also maintaining a core curricular identity. In the liberal arts education literature, there are three main features that define a liberal arts education. These are: a) citizenship education, b) exploration of purpose and meaning, and c) Socratic pedagogy. Moreover, the core of a traditional liberal arts curriculum consists of study in the arts and humanities disciplines. The literature review in Chapter 2 elaborates on each of these features of a traditional liberal arts education. In terms of elasticity, my study investigated whether moving the core of a traditional liberal arts education online is perceived to be a pedagogical stretch or a critical break.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **PRESENTATION OF PROBLEM**

#### **Disruptive Change in Teaching and Learning**

Recent and significant changes in teaching and learning in higher education are driving forces behind the importance of this study. The beginning section of this chapter describes these changes in order to offer a clear picture of the scale of ongoing changes, which deserves the close attention of educational researchers.

The number of students in postsecondary education who reported being enrolled in at least one online course increased from 1.6 million in 2002 to 7.1 million students in 2013. During this time, the growth rate of students enrolling in at least one online course has consistently exceeded the rate of overall enrollment growth in U.S. higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2014). As of 2013, roughly one third of all students in postsecondary education were enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman). The pressure to adopt digital technology and online learning comes from internal and external sources (Owen & Demb, 2014). For example, incoming students simply expect that technology will be a significant component of their educational experience (Owen & Demb). For many students, the convenience of online learning makes this format an attractive option. Internally, many institutions are developing online courses and programs in hopes of generating more revenue, managing costs, improving retention, and serving nontraditional populations (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012). Clearly, the growth of online learning is an example of how digital technology has already transformed how a large portion of students are pursuing higher education.

A second example of how teaching and learning is changing in higher education is the application of various digital technologies into traditional face-to-face classrooms, blurring the

distinction between what is considered an online, hybrid, or face-to-face course (Johnson, Adams Becker, V., & Freeman, 2014). New capabilities, such as automated online grading with real-time feedback, online modules, course discussion boards and blogs, and digital games could continue to transform instruction in higher education. However, a recent national survey of faculty practices revealed that less than 20% of faculty report using these methods often (Housewright, Schonfeld, & Wulfson, 2013). The New Media Consortium predicts that emerging digital technologies such as learning analytics and adaptive learning software will continue to push existing online instruction to further evolve and become more complex (Johnson et al., 2014). The continued proliferation of social media and mobile devices could increase the collaborative nature of online learning, also increasing “mobile learning” where students achieve much of their learning outside the bounds of a traditional classroom setting (Johnson et al., 2014). According to The New Media Consortium, educators will soon be confronted with decisions about whether or not to incorporate new digital tools into their teaching. Some of these tools can track large amounts of data on individual learners and have increasingly sophisticated applications of artificial intelligence, 3D printing, and learning through gaming (Johnson et al., 2014).

Massive growth in online learning, in combination with the application of new digital tools in teaching and learning are prompting education leaders and popular media to describe an impending tsunami of change in higher education (Brooks, 2012; Durden, 2012). Stated another way, technological innovation will disrupt long-held conventions in higher education (Christensen, Horn, Caldera, & Soares, 2011). Currently, a postsecondary education degree is an expensive, complicated, and relatively inaccessible product in the higher education marketplace (Christensen et al., 2011). According to some, online learning has the potential to redefine how



higher education is delivered while making a college degree more accessible and less expensive (Bowen, 2012; Christensen et al., 2011). However, when disruptive innovation occurs, the new technology is often initially viewed as having inferior quality than a conventional product. As the technological innovation is refined, the new product or delivery method begins to take over the market (Christensen et al., 2011). Attitudes toward online learning have mimicked this pattern over the last decade (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Given the recent and precipitous spread of online learning and the ongoing proliferation of progressively sophisticated mobile devices, it seems likely that educational technology will play an increasingly central role in teaching and learning in the Digital Age.

Some leaders in higher education are optimistic about the rise of online learning. One common refrain among advocates of online learning is that new delivery formats will enable wider access to higher education. Further, many hope that online learning and the use of digital teaching tools will (a) improve learning outcomes and (b) reduce the cost of instruction; however there is a lack of data to either support or refute either of these two claims (Bowen, 2013; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; Twigg, 2003).

For others, the growth of online learning, the application of new digital tools for teaching and learning, and the rhetoric of disruptive innovation are causes for concern. Some caution that technology can harm our ability to deep think deeply, be emotionally well, and connect socially with others (Falk, 2014). There is also concern that faculties will shrink as instruction shifts to digital formats (Delbanco, in Bowen, 2013). Additionally, many leaders in higher education are skeptical that online learning has the same educational value that face-to-face formats allow. Nationally, 25% of chief academic officers still believe online instruction to be “inferior” or “somewhat inferior” to face-to-face instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2014). There is particular

concern that online instruction is not well suited to the nature of instruction in the humanities disciplines. Delbanco represents this position by stating:

I don't think it's possible to overemphasize the distinction between instruction and provocation. It's a distinction that can be restated in many ways: facts versus knowledge; skills versus wisdom; discipline versus inspiration; information versus insight... [higher education] has been moving away from the first term in the pair and toward the second. I believe that online technologies are likely to move the needle further and faster in that direction. (Delbanco in Bowen, 2013, p. 141).

Online learning continues to grow despite significant concerns and uncertainty regarding its educational value. The growth of online learning, coupled with uncertainty regarding the implications for teaching and learning poses a significant problem that warrants the attention of educational researchers.

### **Scope of Study: Traditional Liberal Arts Education and Online Learning**

The aggregate growth of online learning is a clear and “disruptive” problem that is expansive and complex. There are over 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States. Together, these institutions are a compilation of differing institutional types, each with unique features and missions. Therefore, major forces such as the rise of online learning will have a differentiated impact on the various missions and institutions within higher education. Because of this, it is important for researchers to explore the unique factors that relate to the impact of online learning in different sectors of higher education. Although research at a systemic level is important, the in-depth study of specific sectors is similarly important. Therefore, the scope of this study will center on one distinct form of postsecondary education that is both valuable and increasingly vulnerable: traditional liberal arts education. One indicator of the vulnerability of liberal arts education is the declining number of liberal arts colleges.

One challenge related to discussing liberal arts education is that the terms “liberal arts” and “liberal education” are often used interchangeably, with varying connotations. Whereas the

term *liberal arts* is generally used to refer to a defined set of disciplines in the arts, sciences, and humanities, *liberal education* commonly refers to a broad or general education that is aimed at particular outcomes related to democratic citizenship. There are a range of institutional types, such as large research universities, that have incorporated liberal learning into their educational missions. Consequently, the pursuit of liberal education is certainly not limited to liberal arts colleges. Because of this, discussion of liberal arts colleges and liberal arts education are often subsumed by more general conversations about liberal education at other kinds of institutions. This study is specifically concerned with traditional liberal arts education, rather than the much broader project of liberal education. The following sections outline how the rise of online learning poses a particular problem to traditional liberal arts education.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a strong record of evidence indicating that the pedagogy of traditional liberal arts education cultivates valuable learning outcomes in undergraduates. These outcomes are valuable to the liberal arts graduates themselves, but also to society at large. Drawing from extensive research, Chickering and Gamson (1987) proposed several good practices of undergraduate education. These practices include a) student-faculty contact, b) cooperation among students, c) active learning, d) prompt feedback to students, e) time on task, f) high academic expectations, g) respect for diverse students and diverse ways of knowing (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Although Chickering and Gamson proposed these elements of good practices a few decades ago, discussion around these elements has pervaded the literature. According to Google Scholar (Google, n.d.), Chickering and Gamson's (1987) landmark article has been cited over 4,400 times in the literature since its publication. Furthermore, there is a substantial literature describing and documenting the quality of undergraduate education available at liberal arts

colleges (Astin, 1999; Clark, 1970; Pascarella, Wolniak, Seifert, Cruce, & Blaich, 2005; Seifert, Salisbury, Pascarella, Blaich, & Goodman, 2010; Umbach & Kuh, 2006). By incorporating these good practices, liberal arts colleges offer educational experiences that develop critical thinking skills, leadership skills, and the moral and civic character<sup>1</sup> of undergraduate students (Chopp, 2014). So-called practical benefits of a liberal arts education include the ability to listen, analyze, weigh evidence, think critically, solve complicated problems, speak and write clearly, think critically and morally, question one's own basic assumptions, be sensitive to diversity, and be intellectually flexible (Roche, 2010).

Based on the above empirical research, one could conclude that liberal arts colleges are effectively delivering liberal arts education. Weiss (2014) offered six key elements that distinguish liberal arts colleges: a) formative educational experience, b) comprehensive learning environment, c) engaged faculty, d) high impact learning practices, e) outstanding postgraduate outcomes, and f) powerful alumni networks. Liberal arts colleges leverage these elements to equip students with a broad knowledge base that can be used to improve the world (Chopp, 2014). Therefore, it seems the liberal arts college is a rich setting for cultivating a traditional liberal arts education.

Despite the strong record of traditional liberal arts education described above, some liberal arts colleges are beginning to offer online courses and programs. These colleges are doing so amidst uncertainty regarding the educational value of online learning. During the fall semester of 2013, I reviewed and catalogued the online course offerings of liberal arts colleges by accessing publicly available information on the Internet. The population of liberal arts colleges for my investigation included all institutions in the *National Liberal Arts Colleges* category as

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<sup>1</sup> Terms such as *critical thinking*, *leadership* and *civic character* are so ubiquitous in the higher education literature that there is a risk for these words to lose any definitive meaning. These terms are addressed in more detail in Chapter 2.

defined by U.S. News & World Report in 2013. Liberal arts colleges were defined as primarily undergraduate and residential campuses where at least half of the graduating students major in a liberal arts or science discipline. I discovered that 25% of liberal arts colleges offered credit-bearing online courses at the undergraduate level, with 12.5% offering fully online bachelor's degrees. There is some anecdotal explanation for why some liberal arts colleges are beginning to offer online courses. For example, Hope College recently began offering online courses in the summer in order to help students graduate in four years (Pannapacker, 2014). Vassar College wanted to add an interactive component to their summer reading courses by incorporating online instruction (Taylor, 2014). Still, the literature is sparse and does not adequately address why liberal arts colleges are moving some of their teaching and learning online.

If liberal arts colleges are the stewards of traditional liberal arts education, then their choices to move online could have significant implications for traditional liberal arts education more broadly. Although some liberal arts colleges are beginning to offer online master's degrees and online courses in vocational disciplines, some are moving the very core of their traditional liberal arts courses online, such as philosophy, literature, and history. This study was aimed at this specific problem. Moving the core of a traditional liberal arts education online could potentially be undermining the essence of this valuable form of education. My research for this dissertation gathered in-depth data from one such case by taking advantage of the opportunity to interview multiple stakeholders at a liberal arts college that was at a critical juncture in determining the potential future of online liberal arts education at that college.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the degree of perceived compatibility between traditional liberal arts education and online learning. By interviewing key

stakeholder groups of a liberal arts college, I hoped to uncover and probe the key issues, tensions, and trade-offs related to moving the core courses of a traditional liberal education, such as literature, philosophy, and history to online formats. The data collected in this study renders a more detailed picture of the beliefs and perceptions that exist regarding the relationship between online learning and the liberal arts. One benefit to the case study approach is that the analysis of a complex case can enable researchers to identify relevant variables that can be tested in future studies (George & Bennett, 2005). Mapping out this terrain is an important step in identifying the specific pedagogical issues that would make online environments compatible or incompatible with traditional liberal arts education. Hopefully, my research has set some groundwork for further studies that can test the learning outcomes of specific efforts in delivering a traditional liberal arts education in specific online formats. Further studies could test the accuracy stakeholder perceptions with the empirical outcomes of online liberal arts education. In other words, this study gathered a rich set of beliefs and assumptions related to online liberal arts education, which can be empirically tested in future research.

### **Research Questions**

In order to research the problem of online learning and liberal arts education, I conducted an embedded case study that analyzed and compared key stakeholder groups at a liberal arts college. My research focused on this problem by asking the following question: From the point of view of different stakeholders (i.e. students, faculty, academic administrators), what are the implications when the essential core of a traditional liberal arts education moves online? This question is aimed at probing how relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college understand the compatibility of online learning and a traditional liberal arts education. The following specific research questions guided this study:

1. What understandings exist among relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college regarding the essential nature and core purpose of a traditional liberal arts education?
2. To what extent do relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college believe that online learning challenges or undermines a traditional liberal arts education?
3. To what extent do relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college believe that introducing online learning into liberal arts education can support the ideals of a traditional liberal arts education?

These research questions arise out of the theoretical assumptions of natural and open systems organizational theory. Natural systems theorists posit that organizations do not function as purely rationalized entities that clearly and uniformly pursue a set of formalized, espoused goals (Scott & Davis, 2007). Instead, natural systems perspectives acknowledge that the goals, beliefs, values, and expectations of the individuals within an organization influence organizational behavior (Scott & Davis, 2007). Furthermore, natural systems theorists acknowledge that organizations are “social groups attempting to adapt and survive” (Scott & Davis, 2007, p. 60). In other words, even when an organization manages to rally around a common goal, there are always goals and resources dedicated to the survival and maintenance of the organization itself (Scott & Davis, 2007). Open systems perspectives add a layer of analysis to natural systems perspectives by acknowledging the role that external stakeholders play in influencing an organization. Additionally, open systems perspectives acknowledge that organizations are situated within a broader sociocultural and economic environment (Scott & Davis, 2007). However, it is important to note that this proposed study is not an administrative or organizational study. As the research questions indicate, this proposed study is about the experiences, beliefs, and understandings of stakeholders who are embedded within a particular

institutional context. There are certainly organizational and institutional factors influencing the perceptions of stakeholders, however these factors function as a backdrop for the study. There are certainly organizational and administrative implications that arise out of the findings from this study; however these are not the primary focus of this research.

Another reason I focused on stakeholder groups is that the governance structures of higher education institutions lend themselves particularly well to this kind of analysis. The shared governance model of colleges and universities results in an environment where power and authority is diffuse throughout several different stakeholder groups (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Given this reality, the data for this study was collected and organized by stakeholder groups. Because power is diffuse and institutional purpose is opaque, probing the varied understandings and perceptions of stakeholders adds clarity to our knowledge of how liberal arts education could or should look if it is to be offered online.

### **Research Setting**

Unique contextual factors play a significant role in any research setting. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and describe the basic setting and context in which this study was conducted. In one sense, this study was conducted within the broader context of the liberal arts college sector. At the same time, the setting for this study was the particular institutional context of Middleton College. The following section offers a basic introduction to these two layers of environmental context.

#### **Liberal Arts College Sector**

Plainly stated, the liberal arts college sector is an ideal setting to study liberal arts education. This sector has long been a bastion for traditional liberal arts education. However, one challenge for this project is that there is not a singular, authoritative definition of what constitutes



a liberal arts college. The following paragraphs seek to provide some clarity in this regard. Books and articles discussing liberal arts colleges often give considerable attention to defining what exactly they mean when referring to a “liberal arts college” (Ferrall, 2011; Hawkins, 2000). Furthermore, since 1970, the Carnegie Foundation has attempted four times to define and re-work the criteria for defining a liberal arts college; offering criteria such as admissions selectivity, level of emphasis on undergraduate education, and proportion of liberal arts degrees to vocational degrees awarded each year (Ferrall, 2011; McCormick & Zhao, 2005). Despite this ambiguity, there is general agreement as to some of the essential characteristics of liberal arts colleges. One key characteristic is a curriculum that emphasizes the undergraduate study of the arts and sciences disciplines (Ferrall, 2011). Amherst College history professor emeritus Hugh Hawkins (2000) synthesizes much of the current thinking by defining a liberal arts college as:

A four-year institution of higher education, focusing its attention on candidates for the B.A. degree who are generally between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, an institution resistant to highly specific vocational preparation and insisting on a considerable breadth of studies... [that hopes to develop] interests and capabilities that will enrich both the individual learner and future communities” (p. 23).

Hawkins’ definition is flexible, but clearly outlines the values, mission, and identity of liberal arts colleges. Key elements of a liberal arts college are an intimate, small, residential campus, and a faculty commitment to undergraduate teaching, (Hawkins, 2000).

Some of the distinctive characteristics of liberal arts colleges are an environment of academic intimacy, a focus on undergraduate instruction in the arts and sciences disciplines, and a commitment to residential campus experiences that foster wholistic development in students (Lang, 2003). Liberal arts colleges encourage learning for its own sake, and enable the exploration of existential meaning and purposes of one’s life (Roche, 2010). Although features such as these form the nature of the educational experience at liberal arts colleges, the sector is

certainly not monolithic. Institutional wealth and prestige are both highly stratified in the liberal arts college sector (Ferrall, 2011). The large endowments and prestige statuses of elite liberal arts colleges shelter these institutions from the volatility of the educational marketplace. However, less wealthy and prestigious institutions are more directly affected by the whims of student demand, the rising costs of instruction, and the volatility of financial markets. These less prestigious colleges tend to serve local or regional students (Weiss, 2014). Despite the economic variation within the liberal arts college sector, there is considerable consistency in mission, values, curriculum, and residential character.

### **Middleton College**

In many important ways, Middleton represents a typical residential liberal arts college. Middleton College is a medium sized, faith-based liberal arts college in the Midwest. Middleton College was founded in the mid 1800's as a college and seminary. Although the College eventually separated from the Seminary, the undergraduate experience remains strongly tied to its Christian mission and identity. Throughout the twentieth century, the curriculum was predominantly focused on the liberal arts disciplines. However by the close of the century, professional programs such as engineering, nursing, and education had grown significantly in proportion to the liberal arts programs. This is a common narrative for much of the liberal arts college sector at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In terms of endowment size, tuition costs, admissions selectivity, and institutional ranking, Middleton is located in the top half of the liberal arts college sector. Middleton is committed to the liberal arts disciplines, however there is also a strong presence of professional programs at the college. Currently, Middleton offers over 100 majors, and enrolls 4,000 undergraduate students (Middleton College, 2014). Close to half of students at Middleton major

in areas outside the liberal arts disciplines. This is also characteristic of many liberal arts colleges today. There are a marginal number of graduate students in the Master of Education and Speech Pathology programs. Despite the co-existence of liberal arts and professional programs, the campus community understands itself to be a liberal arts institution.

Middleton demonstrates the residential character and commitment to small class sizes that is typical for a liberal arts college. Students at Middleton are required to live on campus for their first two years but are given the option to live off campus after that. Small class sizes and full-time tenured professors are the norm. The student to faculty ratio is 13:1 with 82% of faculty holding the most advanced credential in their field (Middleton College, 2014). The college employs a limited number of adjunct professors.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant at multiple levels. Because the setting is a liberal arts college, the findings are particularly useful to leaders at liberal arts colleges. My research may equip leaders at liberal arts colleges to better navigate the challenging market of higher education in the Digital Age. These leaders are charged with responding to external challenges and pressures, such as the rise of online learning, while trying to maintain the distinct and positive features of their colleges. Data from this study should equip administrators at liberal arts colleges to address the problem of how to respond to the rise of online learning. The liberal arts college sector is worthy of our attention because these colleges offer such a rich, unique, and meaningful undergraduate educational experience that is transformative for students and has significant benefits to society (Pascarella, Wolniak, Seifert, Cruce, & Blauch, 2005; Roche, 2010; Chopp, 2014).

We should be concerned about the plight of liberal arts colleges. These institutions provide leadership in liberal arts education and are surrounded by an overall narrative of decline

(Ferrall, 2011). The number of liberal arts colleges has decreased significantly over the course of the last few decades (Baker, Baldwin, & Sumedha, 2012; Breneman, 1990). Although some colleges have closed due to financial problems, other institutions remain open, but are no longer classified as liberal arts colleges because they have shifted their curricular focus away from the liberal arts and sciences disciplines (Baker et al., 2012). Some liberal arts colleges facing particularly bleak financial outlooks have been purchased by for-profit institutions, changing their curriculum to focus on job training, graduate degrees, and online instruction (Ferrall, 2011). The rise of online learning is particularly problematic for the liberal arts college sector because adopting online learning may change the nature, mission, educational experience, and effectiveness of these colleges. The question of the compatibility or incompatibility of online learning with the very core of a traditional liberal arts education is particularly urgent and salient because the sector is financially stressed and shrinking. On the one hand, if online instruction does not align with a liberal arts education, then any movement by colleges to this end is further jeopardizing the integrity and health of the sector. On the other hand, if online instruction has a role to play in offering effective liberal arts education experiences, then college leaders need to have an informed understanding of the tradeoffs and affordances that online learning may offer these institutions.

This study has significance beyond the liberal arts college sector. Many institution types across U.S. higher education offer liberal arts courses and degrees. Leaders at these institutions could benefit from the insights gained from this study regarding online liberal arts education. Findings from my research have implications for policy and practice at any institution that offers “core” liberal arts courses. The liberal arts are a vital aspect of a broad portion of U.S. postsecondary education institutions. Finally, liberal arts education warrants our close attention

because this kind of learning contributes to the health and flourishing of just and stable democracies (Nussbaum, 2010; Roth, 2014).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study explored the understandings that exist among relevant stakeholders regarding the compatibility of traditional liberal arts education and online learning. The first major sections of this literature review describe how the idea of liberal arts education has traditionally been understood. This synthesis of the literature outlines the essential characteristics of a traditional liberal arts education in terms of its educational aims, pedagogy, and curriculum. The second major section of this literature review offers a conceptual framework that guides our thinking about online learning. This section also describes how my study is situated within the existing literature that addresses the perceptions and use of online learning.

#### **Essential Features of Traditional Liberal Arts Education**

The following section of this literature review offers a historic perspective on a traditional understanding of the features of liberal arts education in order to demonstrate two important points. First, there has been an ongoing and relatively unchanging understanding regarding the nature and purpose of a liberal arts education, which has persisted since ancient Greek civilization (Sorum, 2005). This historic understanding informed the interview protocol and framed my analysis of the data that I collected for this study. Second, the idea of what constitutes a liberal arts education has been adapted and redefined throughout changing historical contexts. This section begins with a description of a traditional liberal arts education by elaborating on the following core features: a) citizenship education, b) telos, and c) Socratic pedagogy. Next, this section provides historic examples of how the liberal arts curriculum has changed over time.

## Education for Citizenship

The concept of *artes liberales* can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome where education was meant to be a free and liberating pursuit of knowledge (Roth, 2014). According to thinkers such as Plato and Cicero, the study of particular skills should never be separated from the study of values (Sorum, 2005). In ancient Greek society, a liberal arts education was meant to develop the skills and virtues that would be necessary to participate in and lead a democracy (Sorum, 2005). Although a liberal arts education in ancient Greece was certainly aimed at shaping democratic citizens, it was also an elitist education that was inaccessible to women or slaves (Delbanco, 2012). American liberal arts education began in a similarly elitist thread during the colonial era, however “the distinctive American contribution [to liberal education] has been the attempt to democratize it...that all persons, regardless of origin, have the right to pursue happiness” (Delbanco, 2012, p. 33). Initially, colonial liberal arts colleges were aimed at grooming the elite class of young White males with the intellect, character, and leadership skills that would prepare them for various leadership roles in American society (Lang, 2003). However, the consistent expanding of access to higher education to larger and more diverse segments of society challenged the idea that liberal education should be reserved for the exclusive ruling elite. Instead, liberal education became seen by many as a means for educating students from a range of backgrounds to become good citizens, which would develop a more socially just, equitable, and cohesive society (Roth, 2014).

W. E. B. Du Bois is a well-known advocate for liberal arts education from a more recent era. During the years following the American Civil War, Du Bois emphasized the power of a liberal arts education to liberate groups of people as they sought more full participation in a free democratic society. Du Bois believed that a broad, liberal arts education would enhance the

quality of life for freed slaves in their pursuit of truly free lives. By empowering a critical mass of African American artists and thinkers through a liberal arts education, Du Bois believed that African Americans would gain full civil and political rights (Horowitz, 2005, p. 16). While Du Bois acknowledged that education provided economic benefit, he emphasized the value of a liberal arts education in terms of its potential for intellectual and cultural liberation (Roth, 2014).

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars also emphasized the importance of civic education as a means for national security and democratic stability. It was believed that if the masses of a democracy were liberally educated, then this would ensure the health of a free and democratic society. Liberally educated masses would be able to resist indoctrination or unthinking allegiance to oppressive political regimes (Roth).

To summarize, inculcating civic responsibility or providing “education for citizenship” has played an important role in liberal arts education since ancient Greek civilization. There is a clear and consistent attention to the civic purposes of education. It is important to note that although a liberal arts education is a freeing experience for individuals, this form of education also provides important benefits to the broader democratic society. In this way, good education for citizenship develops particular skills such as critical reasoning, empathy, civic responsibility, and other virtues and skills that contribute to free, stable, just, and flourishing democratic societies (Nussbaum, 2010; Roche, 2010).

Liberal arts colleges in the United States have a long tradition of this emphasis on education for democratic citizenship. This is done by fostering critical reasoning, empathy, civic responsibility, and other virtues in small, intimate, residential campus settings. The research literature does not adequately address whether online learning environments are capable of fostering these particular outcomes. Most of the literature addressing the use of on using online



learning for citizenship education is aimed at using mobile digital devices to encourage students in K-12 education to become more “civically engaged” or “active citizens.” However, liberal arts education has the aim of developing citizens who are more than simply active or engaged. The goal is to develop citizens who are committed to equitable, stable, and just societies (Roth, 2014).

Nonetheless, one study directly investigated whether citizenship education could be done effectively online. In this study, Starkey and Savvides (2009) found that students enrolled in master’s level online courses reported feeling a sense of an international learning community. Further, these students demonstrated higher order thinking in online courses as they engaged with socio-political debates. Although these results establish the plausibility of online civic education, Starkey and Savvides did not focus on undergraduates. More research is needed to assess how undergraduates might respond to online learning environments that are aimed at fostering civic outcomes. Consequently, my study focused on undergraduate education at a liberal arts college. To this end, my research was an exploratory study that maps out the beliefs that exist regarding the potential for online instruction to cultivate education for citizenship.

## **Telos**

Liberal arts education is characterized by a commitment to educating democratic citizens. However, this commitment is undergirded by a set of values and commitments that inform the pursuit of related outcomes. One of the overarching commitments of liberal educators throughout history is an insistence that education should do more than prepare students for particular jobs. Instead, education should attend to the fundamental existential questions of meaning and human purpose. Therefore, education should be concerned with exploring and answering questions regarding *telos* – or the “chief end” of humanity (Garber, 2007). *Telos* is a Greek concept that

“asks one to have a reason for getting up, a reason for being, that can be sustained over the course of life and can meaningfully direct one’s personal and public responsibilities” (Garber, 2007, p. 59). Liberal arts education uses the study of history, literature, and the arts to explore basic existential questions regarding morality, meaning, and ultimate values (Roche, 2010). A liberal arts education is idealistic in that students engage with ideas such as epistemology, religion, justice, transcendence, virtue, and morality (Roche). This form of education contrasts contemporary attitudes that value “means-end rationality, in ways that tend to obscure what is of intrinsic value” (Roche, 2010, p. 25). Liberal arts educators tend to be critics of forms of education that are only concerned with immediate economic, utilitarian, careerist, and material outcomes (Roche). Instead, liberal educators believe that the pursuit of material prosperity or careerism falls short of providing a compelling telos from which to orient one’s lifelong learning or calling (Delbanco, 2012; Garber, 2007; Nussbaum, 2010; Roche, 2010; Roth, 2014).

Although it is true that a liberal arts education is inherently idealistic, it is also true that “ideas have legs” (Garber, 2007). In other words, praxis is a natural outgrowth of an education that explores questions of telos, or ultimate ends. Therefore, a central goal of a liberal arts education is to help students cultivate a sense of calling or vocation, given their particular conclusions about “ends” such as justice or human flourishing (Roche, 2010). As students explore trans-historical (Delbanco, 2012) existential questions, gain clearer understandings of the world, and develop greater self-awareness of their own motivations, competencies, and limitations, they can begin to integrate this knowledge into a coherent vision for living and striving in the world (Roche, 2010, p. 148). The graduate with a liberal arts education is therefore guided by a sense of practical idealism that has been shaped by engagement with the liberal arts disciplines (Roche).

However, in the Digital Age, knowledge and education are often treated as a commodities to be bought and sold in the global marketplace (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). For example, much of the enrollment growth in online education has been in vocational education that is offered by for-profit institutions (Willinsky, Fischman, & Metcalfe, 2011). Prominent scholars in the literature believe that the growing popularity of the education for-profit model in recent decades threatens the kind education for citizenship that has been a staple of liberal arts education for centuries (Nussbaum, 2010). A liberal arts education places a high value on learning for its own sake, and for pursuing big questions of meaning and purpose (Roche, 2010). In this way, a liberal arts education is aimed at developing wisdom, rather than toward simply knowing information (Ess, 2003). Because the process of learning and wisdom development are inherently “embodied” actions, many are skeptical that “disembodied” online formats alone are sufficient to provide a liberal arts education (Ess, 2003). However this has not been thoroughly studied empirically. As we see in later chapters of this dissertation, the theme of embodied learning was of central importance to many participants in this study. As the popularity of online learning grows, it will be increasingly important for researchers to investigate whether online learning formats are compatible with the exploration of the existential questions related to telos described in this section. Data from my research offers some initial insight into this matter

### **Socratic Pedagogy**

Liberal arts education can be defined by identifying its fundamental aim, which is to enable students to engage with the basic question of telos in order to uncover a sense of personal calling that will orient the praxis of their lives (Garber, 2007; Roche, 2010). This aim of liberal arts education is personal and individualized. However, these personal outcomes also offer civic benefit as liberal arts education aims to improve democratic society (Nussbaum, 2010). The

following sections of this chapter highlight Socratic pedagogy as a primary means for pursuing these aims.

Socratic pedagogy is an essential element in traditional liberal arts education. Socratic pedagogy is characterized by active, exploratory questioning where students are invited to participate and actively reason for themselves instead of simply passively receiving content knowledge (Nussbaum, 2010). Logic, critical argument, and careful self-examination are key aspects of the Socratic method. While learning particular content can still be important, becoming well practiced in the process of reasoning, questioning, and self-scrutiny is the goal of Socratic pedagogy (Nussbaum). A basic assumption of this kind of instruction is that learning is a social and collaborative process where diverse views and ideas interact (Delbanco, 2012). Delbanco refers to this kind of peer-to-peer learning as lateral learning. Lateral learning occurs when students from multiple perspectives are able to contribute to learning experiences through social interaction. Learning is enriched when it is a social process, however it is important to note that active critical reasoning is not exclusively social. Listening to a lecture can be a participatory experience when a listener is “inwardly restless” and actively comparing the speaker’s comments against the listener’s ideas and experiences (Delbanco, 2012, p. 61).

Delbanco is a well-known advocate for Socratic learning. He speaks for many liberal arts educators when he states that it is hard for him to believe that learning that engages the heart and mind in pursuit of self-knowledge can happen “without face-to-face teaching and the physical presence of others” (Delbanco, n.d.). However, proponents of online learning believe that interactive, peer-to-peer Socratic learning can be achieved in online communities of inquiry (Anderson, 2008; Bowen, 2013; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, 2010). This disagreement is unresolved in the literature and there are no definitive empirical conclusions regarding the

effectiveness of technology-mediated instruction in engaging the emotional, spiritual, wholistic, and existential dimensions of a traditional liberal arts education. This study sought the perspectives of administrators, faculty, and students in order to better understand the specific features of this tension. As the results demonstrate in later chapters, Socratic pedagogy and lateral learning are at the heart of the tension between online learning and liberal arts education. Most of the research on online education does not address the reasoning, self-scrutiny, and lateral learning dimensions of education highlighted by Delbanco and Nussbaum.

### **Evolving Liberal Arts Curriculum**

Some features of traditional liberal arts education have remained the same for centuries. However other features have changed significantly. This is an important point to highlight because it grants us permission to explore how a liberal arts education might be reimagined in the Digital Age. By interviewing stakeholders of a liberal arts college, this study was designed to explore whether online liberal arts education is perceived to be simply an adaptation or a significant break from this tradition of education.

In the past, technology and economic forces have pressed liberal arts education to change. The scientific revolution, “de-centering” of the liberal arts canon, and the rise of vocational education are historical examples of such changes. The following sections outline how the traditional liberal arts curriculum has been shaped and has been changed by specific forces throughout history.

### **Greek Roots**

The original liberal arts curriculum covered the seven liberal arts, which were divided into the trivium and quadrivium (Roche, 2010). The three linguistic arts of the trivium included grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The mathematical or physical arts of the quadrivium included

geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. However, social, political, and economic forces have altered the liberal arts curriculum to its present form where students study a broad distribution of disciplines, complemented by an in-depth study of one's major discipline (Roche, 2010). The following paragraphs outline how a few of these forces altered the liberal arts curriculum over time.

### **Scientific Revolution**

The industrialization of the 1800's corresponded with huge gains in scientific knowledge. This expansion of knowledge resulted in an increased specialization and professionalization of faculty in newly emerging disciplines (Thelin, 2011). During this time, scientific discovery was expanding the need for specialized professional knowledge in the workplace. Higher education was understood to be an engine of economic development. Therefore, the 1800's saw an expanding "practical" curriculum beyond the traditional liberal arts disciplines (Thelin, 2007). Despite the considerable benefits of this rapid expansion of knowledge, one negative consequence of the expansion of knowledge was that the curriculum at colleges and universities became more fragmented. With so many specialized areas of knowledge, it became challenging to find a unified way of making sense of disparate knowledge – particularly as higher education moved away from its religious roots, which had previously provided an underlying cohesive worldview (Delbanco, 2012).

This new scientific knowledge had tangible economic benefits, which pushed those in the arts and humanities disciplines to justify their value to those who saw the value of education in terms of economic utility (Roth, 2014). *The Yale Report of 1828* was drafted as a response to pressures to modernize the curriculum in ways that would emphasize the more technical professional knowledge and directly facilitate industrialization and economic development

(Roth, 2014). Rather than see this need for specialized vocational knowledge as a replacement for a liberal arts education, the *Yale Report* argued that professional education was a complement to a liberal or general education. Authors of the report argued that liberal education provided the foundational knowledge, namely the intellectual discipline and habits of thinking, which were necessary for professional work and a satisfying life (Roth). If a liberal arts education was not directly vocational, then it was argued to be a necessary antecedent to vocational education. Therefore, by the mid 1800's, a liberal arts education was commonly understood to provide a foundation for more specialized or professional knowledge that would directly benefit the economy. This idea persists at liberal arts colleges today where professional majors and programs are offered, but with significant course requirements in the liberal arts.

### **De-Centered Canon**

The social and philosophical movements in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century accompanied a de-centering of the liberal arts education curriculum. During this time, scholars again challenged the status quo of the existing conventional liberal arts curriculum (Roth, 2014). If disciplines such as history and literature were important to study, then a logical next question should be asked. Whose history and literature should be studied? Critical scholars argued that the arts and humanities should be studied with attention to the economic, political, and cultural powers that influence these disciplines (Giroux, 1995). Whereas earlier versions of liberal arts education curriculum in the United States covered an established canon of Western thought and culture, feminist and critical theorists highlighted the importance of studying the history and culture of marginalized populations. This expanded the 20<sup>th</sup> century curriculum to cover knowledge, cultures and people groups previously absent from the curriculum (Giroux, 1995). Curricular attention to social power dynamics pushed the idea of a liberal arts education beyond the pursuit

of shared cultural knowledge, and toward a political agenda of equity and social justice. In this way, the liberal or general education curriculum of colleges and universities was no longer always centered on classical, Western culture. (Roth).

### **Vocational Curriculum**

Despite the inherent value of this kind of education, there has been a systemic move away from existential humanistic education and toward a utilitarian vision of education as a tool for workforce development. According to Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, and Levy (2005), “One of the most important changes in American higher education over the last 30 years has been the gradual shrinking of the old arts and sciences core of undergraduate education and the expansion of occupational and professional programs” (p.1). Much of the current public discourse on postsecondary education is concerned with how education can be used as an economic engine and a tool for workforce development in a global economy (Carnevale & Smith, 2011; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; World Bank, 2002). This environment has put pressure on liberal arts colleges. Consequently, many liberal arts colleges are responding to external pressures by vocationalizing their curriculums (Baker et al., 2012).

The expansion of occupational and professional programs at liberal arts colleges represents an ongoing major change in the sector during the past twenty-five years (Baker et al., 2012; Breneman, 1990; Ferrall, 2011). Since 1990, the proportion of occupational and professional degrees conferred at many liberal arts colleges has increased to the point where many of these colleges are no longer considered liberal arts colleges (Baker et al., 2012). This curricular shift is an example of organizational change that has been initiated as a response to external economic pressures. From this perspective, the shift toward occupational and vocational programs at liberal arts colleges is largely an economic choice driven by external pressure;



namely the lack of student demand for pursuing a liberal arts education at a liberal arts college (Ferrall, 2011). When faced with declining enrollments and revenue, liberal arts colleges, particularly the less wealthy and prestigious, are looking to vocational programs to help generate revenue and ensure the survival of the organization (Ferrall, 2011).

While some lament this vocational shift, others believe this fits into the mission of a liberal arts college. For example, Spellman (2009) points out that adding business, engineering, communications, and health studies to the liberal arts college curriculum does not compromise the liberal arts college mission. Instead, this allows for liberal arts college graduates to apply liberal arts outcomes such as critical thinking to their professional fields (2009). This sentiment is echoed in the recent liberal arts college literature, particularly among senior administrators and presidents who face the task of attracting new students and generating tuition revenue. For instance, Rebecca Chopp (2014), president of Swarthmore College defines the purpose of a residential liberal arts college in terms of three central principals: a) critical thinking, b) moral and civil character, and c) using knowledge to improve the world. When discussing the liberal arts college curriculum, Victor Ferrall, President Emeritus of Beloit College emphasizes the importance of *how* students learn rather than the particular content (2011). A liberal arts college education is distinctive, according to Ferrall, in that it has a particular attitude toward learning and knowing (2011). It seems that even contemporary advocates of liberal arts education have made room for programs traditionally understood to be outside the boundaries of liberal arts education.

Drawing the boundaries for what is included in the liberal arts is not a clear cut task (Brewer, 2014). For example, Brewer (2014) speculates that some disciplines within the humanities might not foster the kind of thinking that is commonly characterized as liberal

education. Despite the ambiguity and debate regarding what should be included in the liberal arts education curriculum, there is a strong refrain among contemporary advocates of liberal learning that the arts and humanities form the heart of a liberal education curriculum.

To summarize our discussion of the liberal arts curriculum, there has been significant change since the time when the seven liberal arts disciplines made up the trivium and quadrivium. Expanding scientific and professional knowledge prompted liberal arts colleges to adapt their curriculum by including vocational study. At the same time, liberal arts colleges rearticulated the importance of non-vocational education, as exemplified by *The Yale Report of 1828*. Postmodern thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century de-centered the liberal arts curriculum and made room for the study of marginalized people groups. Core courses such as history and literature remained important; however the goal of a liberal arts curriculum would no longer be to obtain the “shared cultural knowledge” of Western civilization. Instead, multicultural perspectives were added to the liberal arts curriculum. Finally, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the vocational program offerings at liberal arts colleges had grown significantly.

I have given considerable attention discussing the evolution of the liberal arts curriculum in this section in order to establish two important points. First, the content of the liberal arts curriculum is elastic. It has stretched and changed over time, but has retained its core identity and home in the arts, humanities, and sciences disciplines. Second, the content of a liberal arts education curriculum is important, however the recent literature tends to emphasize the importance of the skills gained rather than the mastery of particular bodies of knowledge.

So far in this chapter, I have described the essential features of a traditional liberal arts education. Because of the range of voices included in the literature, there is not a singular, authoritative definition of what constitutes liberal arts education. However, a synthesis of the

literature allows for a reliable account for what constitutes a liberal arts education. I have organized this account in terms of educational aims, pedagogy, and curriculum. First, a traditional liberal arts education is characterized by a commitment to educating citizens with the moral virtue and critical reasoning to contribute to the health of a democracy. The second aim of a traditional liberal arts education is to explore the concept of telos, or the “chief end” and meaning of one’s life by exploring basic humanistic existential questions. Although a liberal arts education is not necessarily a means to an end, deep reflection and Socratic investigation of questions related to telos lead to practical consideration of one’s vocational calling. Third, the pedagogy of a liberal arts education is founded on Socratic principals of active, critical reasoning and questioning where knowledge is pursued rather than received. Socratic learning is a social experience. Finally, the curriculum of a contemporary liberal arts education implies a broad-based education that includes considerable study in the arts, science, and humanities disciplines. Now, equipped with a rich understanding of the liberal arts education tradition, we move to the contemporary question of online learning and traditional liberal arts education.

### **Looking Ahead: Digitized Liberal Arts Education**

The Digital Age poses a new social, political, and economic context that will require educational leaders to consider how the aims, pedagogy, and curriculum of a liberal arts education should take shape in a new era. Online learning and digital tools present new challenges and opportunities in liberal arts education. For example, the communicative potential of new digital tools could prompt educators to consider how one should use their “digital identity” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) to be a “citizen of the web.” Certainly, digital tools allow for new forms of civic engagement and connections that can be used to contribute to the flourishing

of a democracy. It is reasonable to assume that shaping good citizens of the web would require the use of technology-mediated interactions as pedagogical tools.

The current literature makes a strong case for the continued importance of a liberal arts education in the Digital Age. Within the last five years, there has been a flurry of books published by prominent authors that represent the latest iteration of scholars articulating the value of an education grounded in the liberal arts, sciences, and humanities (Ferrall, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010; Roche, 2010; Roth, 2014; Chopp, 2014). The arguments of these books are particular to the 21<sup>st</sup> century context in that they tend to emphasize the relevance of a liberal arts education to a globalized, knowledge economy (Ferrall, 2011; Roche, 2010; Chopp, 2014). However these authors do not address the pedagogical and curricular questions that the rise of online learning poses to liberal arts colleges. These authors emphasize the need for liberally educated citizens, but do not address the question of whether the Digital Age has changed the means by which citizens can become liberally educated. Existential, social, and moral formation are essential parts of becoming liberally educated. Still, it is unknown whether this kind of formation can reliably occur in online settings. The interviews in this study offer insight into the factors that influence this kind of formation in face to face and online settings.

This study adds to the research literature by exploring the understandings that exist among relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college regarding the compatibility of essential features of a liberal arts education experience and online learning. Liberal arts education has persisted and evolved for centuries, however the growth of online learning and digital tools could push liberal arts colleges to re-imagine their aims, pedagogy, and curriculum in order to adapt to a globalized, digitized world. For example, it is possible that digital mobile devices can better facilitate lateral, Socratic learning than traditional formats. It is possible that online learning environments are

particularly well suited for Socratic dialog and existential reflection. However, it is also possible that digital mobile devices impede the development of relationships that have enough intimacy to enable rich lateral learning. Similarly, it is possible that technology-mediated relationships and interactions make it difficult for rich interactive Socratic dialogue to take place. So far, empirical research has not adequately addressed the question of whether these aims of a traditional liberal arts education can be effectively pursued in online and technology-mediated settings. Through interactive interviews with multiple stakeholder groups, this study begins to answer this question. As we will see, there is a need for liberal arts stakeholders to more closely examine how specific aspects of a traditional liberal arts education are incompatible or compatible with specific kinds of digital interaction and educational tools.

### **Conceptualizing Online Learning**

This study investigated how different stakeholders of a liberal arts college perceive the degree of compatibility between a traditional liberal arts education and online learning. The previous section of the literature review provided a thorough synthesis of the liberal arts education literature in order to clearly outline a definition of liberal arts education, which is a concept that is central to this study. The other central concept in this study is online learning. Therefore, the following section of this literature review a) defines key terms in the online learning literature, and b) introduces a widely referenced conceptual model for defining online learning.

The online learning literature is a sprawling and rapidly expanding body of theory and research. One challenge in trying to familiarize oneself with the online learning literature is that the speed of change in digital technology is quite fast. For example, the recent proliferation of smartphones and other mobile devices have shifted some threads of conversation from online

learning toward so-called “mobile learning” that is mediated by mobile digital devices. Social media and ubiquitous access to the web via mobile devices are a new frontier for research on technology-mediated teaching and learning. Similarly, massively open online courses (MOOCs) have garnered significant attention in the past five years about the challenges and affordances of online teaching and learning. Landmark studies, such as a recent meta-analysis of the online learning research literature, have directed the conversation toward hybrid learning (Means et al., 2010). Hybrid learning refers to the use of digital media to augment traditional classroom instruction (Means et al., 2010). However, because formats such as these are so new, there is not an established, conclusive body of literature regarding their relative merit. Because of this, the literature concerning the emerging edge of online learning has splintered into new, evolving, and underdeveloped bodies of knowledge.

The following sections of this chapter synthesize the conceptual and theoretical online learning literature by discussing Terry Anderson’s widely cited model for online learning. The growing body of empirical research is heavily influenced by this model. Anderson’s model is useful because it provides a way of thinking about and describing the important factors that influence learning in technology-mediated settings. After discussing Anderson’s model for online learning, I will summarize the existing empirical research that is most directly related to my proposed study. This research documents the perceptions of faculty, students, and administrators toward technology-mediated and online instruction. However, before introducing Anderson’s framework and summarizing what is currently known, it is important to have a clear understanding of the basic categories of technology-mediated teaching and learning.

**Defining web-facilitated, hybrid, and online courses.** Although instructional practices vary, Allen and Seaman (2013) provide helpful categories for defining various forms of online

instruction; including web-facilitated, blended or hybrid, and fully online courses. These are the definitions that will be used when discussing these terms in this dissertation. A course that does not deliver any content using online digital technology is considered a traditional course. A web-facilitated course delivers up to 30% of content using online digital technology. Web-facilitated courses typically use a learning management system to post assignments and a syllabus, however most of the course consists of face-to-face interactions. Blended or hybrid courses deliver 30-80% of content using online technology. These courses usually include online discussion forums, and have limited opportunities for face-to-face meetings. A fully online course delivers at least 80% of content using online technology and typically does not include any face-to-face interactions.

**Anderson's model of online learning.** Terry Anderson's (2008) model of online learning provides a robust framework that accounts for the kinds of interactions that are possible in online learning environments. The framework emphasizes the interactivity of online learning, which reflects an influence of earlier conceptualizations of online learning.<sup>2</sup> Anderson argues that theories of online learning are still needed in order to “best take advantage of the [enhanced] communication, information retrieval, creative tools, and management capability provided by the Net” (Anderson, 2008, p. 46). Therefore, a good theory of online learning should offer detailed account of the unique characteristics, affordances, and limitations of online learning (Anderson, 2008). Anderson does this by highlighting the role that the teacher and content can play in online learning. Anderson (2008) assumes that any online learning theory is a particular subset of teaching and learning theory. Therefore, his model draws on Bransford, Brown, and Cocking's

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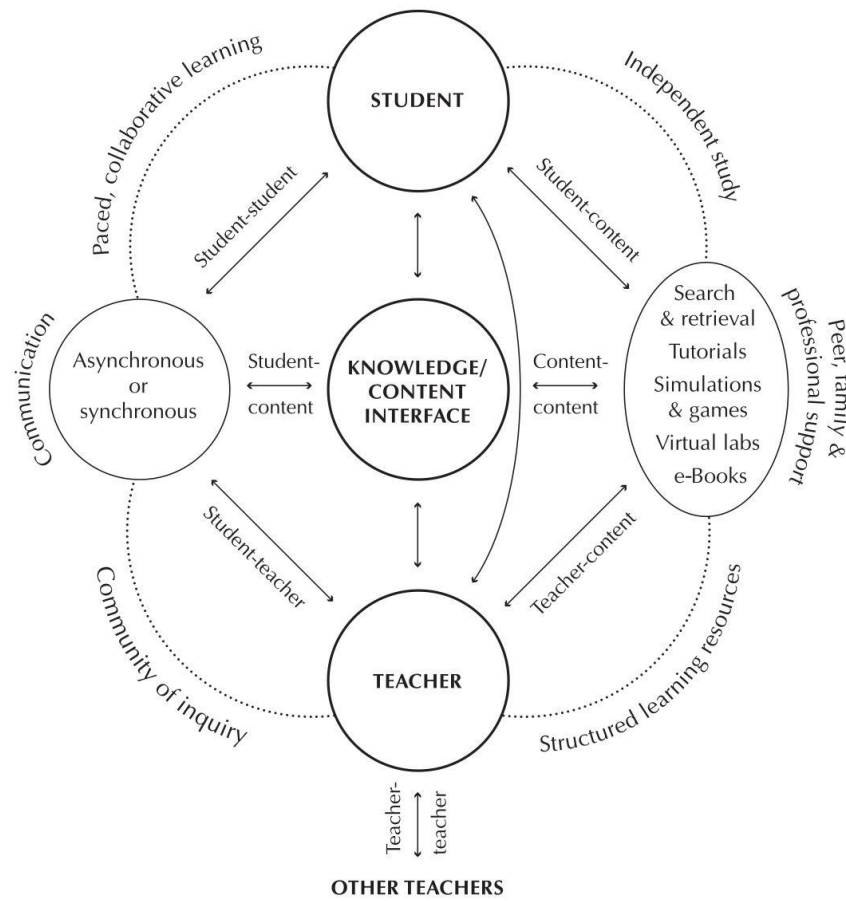
<sup>2</sup> Anderson helped to develop the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison et al., 2000), which states that good online learning occurs when there are high degrees of interactive social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Later, Anderson developed his own framework, which uses more specific terms. Anderson's model also accounts for a more complex world of possible online experiences than the Community of Inquiry Framework does.

(1999) assumption that effective learning is community-centered, knowledge-centered, learner-centered, and assessment-centered. Interaction is a crucial aspect of these components of learning (Anderson, 2003). This is a pervasive assumption in the online learning literature more broadly. Anderson's model of online learning is particularly useful for the proposed study because it provides a way for us to be more precise about what we mean when we refer to "online learning" or "interaction online." Anderson's (2008) model describes six formats of interactions that occur in online environments: a) student-student, b) student-content, c) student-teacher, d) teacher-content, e) teacher-teacher, and f) content-content interaction. The figure on the next page visually maps out these interactions, each of which can be mediated by digital technology, thereby presenting specific challenges and affordances.



**Figure 1: Anderson's Model of Online Learning:**

From Anderson's (2008) *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*



The left side of the model illustrates how digital tools and the Internet can facilitate a “community of inquiry” where asynchronous or synchronous interactions are possible between teachers and learners. The right side of the model illustrates how digital tools and the Internet can facilitate independent learning. Anderson (2008) suggests that different combinations of the various modes of potential interactions online can be managed in order to promote different kinds of learning outcomes. In other words, different learning strategies should be employed in different online formats when different kinds of learning outcomes are desired.

Student-to-student interaction is particularly important to constructivist educators who highlight the learning potential offered by the interaction of multiple perspectives among peers. For those interested in establishing a community of learning, peer-to-peer interaction is essential (Anderson, 2008). Digital technology has the ability to connect people via mobile devices and the Internet, however interaction online has qualitative differences from in-person interactions. For example, online environments lack a sense of place and offer a sense of anonymity not afforded by in-person interaction (Jonassen & Carr, 2000, as cited in Anderson, 2008). Also, the social presence of online environments lack the same sense of social presence and body language that in-person interactions allow (Anderson, 2008). This can be true of synchronous (real time) or asynchronous (email, text message, discussion board threads) interactions between students, between peer teachers, or between a teacher and a student. It is important to underscore the potential significance of these qualitative differences between virtual and face-to-face learning, particularly when considering the emotional and socially provocative aspects of learning. Data from my interviews with stakeholders for this study illuminate the significance of these qualitative differences between online and face to face interactions.

Other modes of online interaction include student-to-content, and teacher-to-content. Because the Internet continues to open up access to vast amounts of information for anybody with an Internet connection, there are unprecedented opportunities for students and teachers to find and access content on their own. In this information rich environment, the role of the teacher often shifts to that of filtering, reducing, and directing students by limiting and focusing the number of otherwise overwhelming content choices available (Anderson, 2008).

Perhaps the most novel form of online interaction described in Anderson's model is that of content-to-content interaction. This kind of interaction occurs when a piece of online content

is automatically updated or refreshed in real time as it interacts with other online content. Digital tools are then able to harvest, distribute, and select content (Anderson, 2008).

While each of these modes of interaction can be valuable, Anderson's earlier work (2003) acknowledged that the necessary combination of interactions for one group of students in one setting is likely to be quite different than what is necessary for other groups in other settings. In other words, student-to-student interaction is not inherently a superior form of interaction than student-to-content. These forms of interaction can be equally valuable to different students in different settings. Consequently, Anderson proposed an "equivalency theory" for online learning, which stated that different forms of online interaction are all potentially equal in their value. The two propositions of equivalency theory are:

*Deep and meaningful formal learning is supported as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher; student-student; student-content) is at a high level. The other two may be offered at minimal levels, or even eliminated, without degrading the educational experience.*

*High levels of more than one of these three modes will likely provide a more satisfying educational experience, though these experiences may not be as cost or time effective as less interactive learning sequences.*

(Anderson, 2003)

These propositions allow educators to be flexible in their understandings of what might constitute effective online teaching and learning. My study was concerned with the perceived degree of compatibility or incompatibility between online learning and a traditional liberal arts education. One of the key features of a traditional liberal arts education is the use of Socratic pedagogy, which is an interactive, social process. Anderson's model of online learning is a useful framework for my study because it directs us to consider how various modes of online interaction might facilitate Socratic teaching and learning, given the affordances and limitations of online settings. The data from this study indicates that some forms of online instruction and

interaction are perceived as being more compatible to traditional liberal arts education than others. Moreover, Anderson's model of online learning is important to acknowledge in this chapter because of its prominence in the online learning literature.

**Limitations of Anderson's model.** Anderson's (2008) model of online learning identifies critical elements of teaching and learning, and how these elements are conceptualized and experienced in online environments. However, this model is simply a starting point for thinking about the compatibility of online learning with traditional liberal arts education. While Anderson's model helps us to focus on particular social and interactional aspects of online teaching and learning, its focus is on educational process rather than outcomes. A traditional liberal arts education is characterized by its distinctive educational process, but is also characterized by its particular educational aims and outcomes

### **National Surveys: Perceptions and Use of Online Learning**

In recent decades, technological change has accelerated the process of globalization, which has transformed the global economy into a knowledge economy that depends on highly trained workers who possess higher order skills such as communication, problem solving, reasoning, and the capability to be life-long learners (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). Many educational leaders posit that significant reform in teaching practices are needed in order for students to gain the competencies necessary for work in the Digital Age (Brown, 2006). Some advocates for reform propose that emerging digital technologies are uniquely positioned to improve teaching and learning in higher education toward this end (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Jenkins, 2009). However, these propositions have not yet been sufficiently tested through empirical research, leaving room for spirited debate regarding the merits of online learning, and technology-mediated instruction (Bowen, 2013). While some recent research has focused on

perceptions of online learning, the literature does not directly address perceptions of the compatibility between online learning and a traditional liberal arts education. There is a need for a more focused discussion of particular forms of education, and how these relates to online learning. This study contributes to the literature by focusing on the perceived compatibility between online learning and a traditional liberal arts education

**Perceptions of online learning.** Some leaders in higher education (Bacow et al., 2012) express optimism that emerging technologies such as learning analytics and adaptive learning software will enable “interactive learning online” that could surpass the educational potential of the traditional face-to-face classroom, and that the proliferation of digital technology will ultimately improve teaching and learning. Advocates of emerging educational technologies expect that these technologies will reduce the costs related to instruction by improving efficiencies (Bowen, 2012). Nationally, leaders in higher education have improved their perception of the quality of online learning over the last decade, however 25% of chief academic officers still believe online instruction to be “inferior” or “somewhat inferior” to face-to-face instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Despite increasing acceptance of online instruction, a significant degree of skepticism toward these formats of teaching and learning persist. A recent large-scale study conducted by EDUCAUSE found that while faculty agree that digital technology may improve access to education, they are less convinced that this technology will actually improve learning outcomes (Dahlstrom & Brooks, 2014). This view is contrasted by students, who tend to report that they prefer and learn best in hybrid learning environments (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013). While much recent attention has been focused on the use of social media and mobile learning, students in one study reported a desire to maintain boundaries between their personal and academic lives, including in their digital lives (Dahlstrom

et al., 2013). My stakeholder analysis in this study offers insight into what accounts for this disconnect.

The literature on faculty and student perceptions of online learning and digital instruction is made up of national survey data. While some reports analyze survey responses according to institutional type, the liberal arts college sector is never identified in national datasets. Liberal arts colleges are obliquely referred to in a recent report conducted by the Babson Group that found that the minority of postsecondary institutions that still do not provide online offerings are almost all private baccalaureate institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Although a majority of baccalaureate institutions nationwide have at least some online offerings, these institutions tend to have the most negative attitudes toward online instruction (Allen & Seaman). These data reveal a possible relationship between institutional type and the adoption of online learning; however liberal arts colleges are never specifically identified. The setting for my study was a liberal arts college. This was an opportunity to take a closer look at a relationship that is only hinted at in the national survey data. This study identifies themes that could be related to the resistance in private baccalaureate institutions to online learning. By interviewing a range of stakeholders in a specific institutional setting, my research provides some of the in-depth data that is lacking in the literature currently. As the results demonstrate in later chapters, stakeholders at Middleton are asking different questions, raising different concerns, and have perspectives not covered in the national conversation regarding online learning more generally.

**Use of online instruction.** Despite the rhetoric and projections of the continued transformation of higher education through online and digital technology, a recent national survey of faculty found that a significant majority of faculty do not regularly employ digital technologies such as digital games, automated feedback, or simulations in their classrooms

(Housewright, Schonfeld, & Wulfson, 2013). For the most part, faculty do not often use video chat, post videos online, or “flip” their classrooms (Housewright et al., 2013). Empirical evidence reveals that the most frequent use of digital technology is by far the most traditional; showing videos during class, or using an email list or discussion board through a course management system (Housewright et al., 2013). Digital technology provides many affordances for innovation and change in teaching and learning, however faculty interest, and lack of training are factors that inhibit more widespread use of online and digital technology for teaching and learning in higher education (Bacow et al., 2012; Housewright et al., 2013). A fair amount of the literature is dedicated to exploring why faculty may choose to try out various online instructional methods (Anderson, Varnhagen, & Campbell, 1998; Bacow et al., 2012; Burleson, 2011; Sahin & Thompson, 2007; Spodark, 2003). Barriers to faculty adoption of online learning include lack of training, compensation, or rewards. Generally, faculty recognize that they could use more features of their learning management systems, and that a better integration of technology into their courses could improve their teaching (Dahlstrom & Brooks, 2014). My study complements these findings by using interviews of faculty, students, and administrators to collect more in-depth data.

So far, I have introduced the growing and urgent problem that the rise of online learning poses to U.S. postsecondary education. In Chapter 1, I posited that digital technology is transforming teaching and learning in higher education despite uncertainty regarding its educational value. There is a need for a better understanding of the implications of these changes on specific sectors of U.S. postsecondary education. While some hope that online and digital technology will improve access and quality to education, others are concerned that using digital instructional tools and online learning formats will have a negative effect on learning.

Specifically, there is concern that online instruction will not achieve emotional social, cognitive, and “existential” learning that characterizes a traditional liberal arts education. Amidst these concerns, some liberal arts colleges are moving their traditional liberal arts courses to online formats. Moving the core of a traditional liberal arts education online could potentially be undermining this valuable form of education. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how groups of stakeholders at one liberal arts college understand the compatibility between a traditional liberal arts education and online learning. The data collected for this study provides an in-depth understanding of the perceived relationship between liberal arts education and online learning.

In Chapter 2, I synthesized the literature on liberal arts education in order to outline the essential features of a traditional liberal arts education. This established a consistent definition for this study. Next, I demonstrated the evolution of what has been considered a liberal arts education curriculum. This provided the theoretical space to allow us to consider how the rise of online learning may be pushing liberal arts education to evolve. I also introduced Anderson’s (2008) model of online learning because it is a conceptual framework that outlines and summarizes the various modes of online learning. Importantly, Anderson’s model provides a detailed way to describe the various kinds of interactions that are possible in online learning environments. Interaction and presence are key elements of Anderson’s model and are key themes that arose from the data this study. Thus, Chapter 2 has defined and described the theoretical space of liberal arts education and online learning.

Finally, Chapter 2 concluded with a review of the empirical literature that addresses stakeholder perceptions of online learning. This literature is made up primarily of national surveys, and does not specifically measure the perceptions of stakeholders at liberal arts colleges.



In contrast, my study employed in-depth interviews to gather data from key stakeholder groups at a specific institutional context, namely a liberal arts college. Again, my study addresses an urgent and important problem, as outlined in Chapter 1. While Chapters 1 and 2 provide the foundation and impetus for my study, Chapter 3 outlines the rationale for my specific plan for examining this problem.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The following chapter outlines the rationale and methodology that informed the design for this study.

#### **Research Paradigms**

A research paradigm is a worldview that has specific values, ontology, and epistemology that inform the methodology for one's research (Dillon, O'Brien, Heilman, 2003). This study was influenced by social constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. Constructivist paradigms assume that humans "construct their perceptions of the world" (Glesne 2006, p. 7) and that the researcher plays an active role in constructing reality with the participants (Creswell, 2009). Constructivist theorists believe that "individuals create or construct their own new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already believe and the ideas, event, and activities in which they come into contact" (Ultanir, 2012, p. 195). The foundational questions of social constructivism ask "How have people in this setting constructed their beliefs and views?" (Remler Dahlia & Van Ryzin, 2011, p. 61). In this specific study, I was concerned with uncovering how key stakeholder groups in a liberal arts college setting construct their beliefs and views toward liberal arts education and online learning.

Although this study was guided by a constructivist paradigm, my ontological and epistemological assumptions affirm the existence of an objective truth and world. I also believe that human perception and cognition subjectively influence how reality is experienced and interpreted. Therefore, I am guided by an interpretivist paradigm that assumes that the world does not exist independently of the mind but is always interpreted through the mind, where reality is "socially constructed, complex, and ever changing" (Glesne, 2010, p. 8). These social

constructs are created individually, but also socially as a group. In other words, reality is not socially constructed, but instead individual and social constructs are the result of the limited ability for humans to understand, interpret, and create meaning from a complex but objective metaphysical reality.

## **Defining the Case**

### **Single Case: Embedded Sub-Units**

The basic research design for this study is a case study. By definition, a case study is the examination of a phenomenon that is occurring within a particular bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One challenge for researchers conducting a case study is defining the boundaries of the “case” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The unit of analysis for a case study can range from an individual, to a role, group, organization, community, or nation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The research questions, methodological assumptions, and purpose of a study should dictate where the boundaries of a particular case study are drawn. The following paragraphs will delineate the boundaries for this study while also providing the rationale for these boundaries.

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how key stakeholder groups at a liberal arts college understand the degree of compatibility of traditional liberal arts education and online learning. The goal was to better understand these particular groups. The comparative aspects are within a single case. Therefore, the design for this research is an embedded case study where the focus is on the “embedded” stakeholder groups within the case. Yin (2003) describes an “embedded case study design” as research that analyzes the subunit or subunits within a particular case. The site or “bounded context” for this study was Middleton College. The units of analysis were the stakeholder groups within Middleton. These specific

embedded groups were a) faculty, b) students, and c) academic administrators. This kind of embedded approach allowed for multiple levels of analysis: a) within stakeholder groups, b) between stakeholder groups, and c) across all stakeholder groups (Yin, 2003). In this way, the design for this study dictated how I would later analyze the data. Consequently, this study is not a “wholistic case study” because it is not intended to compare whole institutional cases against each other (Yin, 2003). Instead, I chose to probe the complexity of the different groups within one institutional context.

## **Rationale**

The previous few paragraphs established a basic rationale for why my research questions led me to propose an embedded case study. The following paragraphs provide further rationale for why a single case is made sense for this study. I offer additional rationale for why Middleton is a good choice for the location of this study.

First, single case study designs are often chosen by researchers when a case represents an “extreme or unique case” (Yin, 2003, p. 41). The current situation of Middleton poses such a case. There was a unique opportunity at Middleton to capture data from a liberal arts college that was at a pivotal intersection with respect to its relationship with online learning. In 2012 Middleton began experimenting with online courses by launching a pilot program of fewer than five online courses, which were initially only open to high school students looking for dual enrollment credit. Middleton is unique in that these courses included courses that have been long understood to make up the core of a traditional liberal arts education: literature, history, and philosophy. For the pilot program, professors were provided full semester course releases to develop their new online courses, and had significant support from the teaching and learning office. In subsequent years, the online course offerings grew, and Middleton students were

permitted to enroll in the courses. Currently, Middleton has delayed making a definitive decision regarding the future of online learning, and is still operating these online courses under the umbrella of a pilot program. However, Middleton is on the cusp of making an institutional decision regarding the role that online learning will play at the college in years to come.

It is important to note that Middleton is a liberal arts college where stakeholders have experience to draw from when discussing online versions of a traditional liberal arts education. Although large universities and for-profit providers deliver online courses in liberal arts disciplines, it is reasonable to assume that the nature of these institutions differ from liberal arts colleges in significant ways. The institutional context in which an online course is delivered is an important factor to acknowledge when discussing how these courses are experienced by students. Therefore, Middleton's peculiar situation of being a typical residential liberal arts college that offers a part of its core liberal arts courses online is significant.

The pending decision regarding online learning at Middleton is linked to two other important institutional decision making processes that are also underway. One of these is a program prioritization and strategic planning process that was prompted by a recent financial crisis. Many majors in the arts and humanities are being pressed to boost their enrollment or face cuts. At the same time, Middleton is considering the addition of vocational master's degree programs in areas such as business. Because of the program prioritization process, there is a particularly active conversation on campus about how to understand the liberal arts mission at Middleton, and what programs and disciplines should be prioritized. This contentious debate about prioritizing different programs means that the institution is having an active conversation about what constitutes the core of the institutional mission. This debate has left a tangible mark on campus. During the data collection phase of this study, the faculty in the Art and Art History,

Music, and History Departments were presented with a buyout option in order to avoid involuntary reductions in faculty lines. Each of these departments had a specified number of faculty whom the administration expected to volunteer for a buyout option. Later during the data collection phase of this study, Middleton cut the Greek, Latin, Theatre, and Art History majors, which would only continue to be offered as minors.

Another significant institutional decision making process that is occurring at Middleton is an acrimonious core curriculum revision. Pressures from a variety of sources are pressing Middleton to reduce its core course requirements. Significantly, administrators fear that the large number of required core courses is hurting their ability to enroll students. Therefore, at the same time that Middleton is experimenting with putting some of its core courses online, it is also having an institutional debate about what makes up the core of their liberal arts education. For example, one specific proposal being discussed by the core curriculum committee is whether or not to accept transfer credit from other institutions in “essential” liberal arts courses such as philosophy or history.

To summarize, three significant institutional decision making processes are unfolding at Middleton, each addressing a larger question of what makes up the core of a liberal arts education. These decisions are: a) the future of online learning in traditional liberal arts courses b) how to reduce the core curriculum while maintaining the integrity of a liberal arts education, and c) determine which academic programs should be classified as high, medium, and low priority. These three decision points converge to present an opportunity to conduct research in a setting where there is a tangible institutional identity crisis with respect to the institution’s core liberal arts mission and identity.

While Middleton represents a unique case, it is also a typical liberal arts college context. Single case study designs are often chosen by researchers when a case is “representative” or “typical” (Yin, 2003). In these cases, the goal is to “capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation” (Yin, 2003, p. 41). In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I introduced Middleton by describing the institution in terms of its typical residential liberal arts features. This included a description of the size, enrollment, mission, curriculum, and faith-based character. While it is not necessary to repeat this description here, it is important to mention again at this point in this dissertation because of the implications for the research design. Middleton is a typical liberal arts college environment that is in a unique situation, making it an ideal site for this embedded, single case study.

### **Procedures for Collecting and Analyzing Data**

#### **Participant Selection**

Participants were selected for this study through a process of purposive sampling that was aimed at finding a sample that would provide rich data (Remler Dahlia & Van Ryzin, 2011). The goal for my purposive sampling was to find participants that offer a unique perspective, and who were in roles at Middleton that are most intimately connected to the research topic (Patton, 2002). The participants for this study were made up of people from three stakeholder groups at Middleton: a) faculty, b) students, and c) academic administrators. There are a small number of academic administrators employed at Middleton. Appendix D lists each participant, which included Middleton’s President, Provost, academic deans, and a technology administrator.

For the faculty group, I started by identifying those at Middleton with the most direct experience related to the subject for the study. Therefore, I contacted the faculty at Middleton who had taught core liberal arts courses online at Middleton. Five of the nine faculty responded

to my request for an interview. Some of these faculty members suggested that I interview two professors of education who regularly taught online graduate courses, and who had significant experience and interest in my study. Both of these faculty members responded to my request for an interview. The remaining faculty participants were liberal arts faculty who had not taught online. These faculty names were obtained through recommendations from other faculty participants and administrators. As I continued to set up faculty interviews I also began transcribing and coding the interview data. I knew I had collected enough faculty data when I interviewed my tenth faculty participant, Sarah. For one, I had interviewed the number of faculty participants that I had set out to interview in my research proposal. However, each of her responses to my interview questions fit squarely into my existing coding structure. Because of this, it seemed that I was at or near to a point of “saturation” in my sample (Morse, 1995) where I could reliably begin to summarize and represent the faculty stakeholder group.

For the student group, I used a snowball sampling method, which resulted in six student participants (Remler Dahlia & Van Ryzin, 2011). The student participants in this study were selected through referrals from faculty and staff at Middleton. The initial goal was to interview upper-class students who were liberal arts majors and who had taken at least one online liberal arts course at Middleton. The intent was to collect data from upper-class students who have experienced online liberal arts education at Middleton. I hoped that these students would have the most to say about liberal arts education and online learning because of their experiences. While some faculty participants in this study were happy to provide student referrals from their online course sections, others did not. From faculty referrals, I was able to contacted seven students who had taken online courses at Middleton. From this referral list, three students agreed



to be interviewed. After securing as many student participants as I could through the faculty who had taught online, I had to try other ways to find participants.

I requested a master list of students who had taken online courses at Middleton, however when I asked the technology administrator for these names, he directed me to go back to individual faculty members who had taught online for referrals. Therefore, in order to remain as close as possible to the initial sampling goal, I solicited student referrals from the faculty participants in this study who had not taught online. I asked for names of students who were upper class liberal arts majors. This allowed me to contact five more students, three of whom agreed to sit for an interview. However, none of these additional students had ever taken an online course. Still, it is important to note that all of the student participants in this study had significant experience interacting with others online through digital devices. Therefore, students were able to speak about their direct experience with the social dynamics surrounding synchronous and asynchronous communication online or through digital devices. While they could not speak directly about online liberal arts education from experience, they were able to speak thoughtfully and directly about their own residential liberal arts education. They offered valuable data regarding their perceptions of online learning. All of the student participants were upper-class students who were pursuing at least one liberal arts major. Appendix D provides a chart that lists the student participants in this study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I incorporated a grounded theory approach to the data collection and analysis for this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I collected the data through semi-structured interviews. I recorded the audio of the interviews and I transcribed each interview verbatim into a written transcript. The analysis of the interview data was an iterative process. After each interview, I

made summative notes, but also made notes about my initial impressions of the interview, the inflection, body language, and the non-verbal aspects of the interview. I kept a *researcher journal* where I recorded my own behavior, and reactions from the interview. As I added entries to my journal, I also made notes about potential themes and subthemes as they emerged from the data.

One of the themes that emerged early on during my data collection was that of embodiment. As participants spoke about differences between “physical” and digital spaces, I became particularly self-aware of the physical and digital aspects of my data analysis. Inspired by a recent study that found advantages to taking notes by hand rather than by keyboard (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014), I chose not to use computer software but instead to code “by hand” using paper transcripts, colored pencils, sticky notes, and a three walls of butcher paper.

### **Interview Procedure**

Although I asked each stakeholder group a set of common questions, there was a set of unique questions for each group. I made summative notes and “reflective remarks” on each interview experience (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These remarks helped me to be aware of what I was feeling during the interview, observations about what the participant was “really” saying through body language and tone of voice, personal reactions to specific remarks, doubts about interview quality, or new insight from the interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I began analyzing the interview data through grounded, open coding where the main themes and findings emerged from the data. Despite this open stance, Anderson’s model of online learning provided useful points of reference as potential theme categories became evident. My coding was an iterative process where I assigned broad codes to several transcripts, then re-read each transcript to assign more specific codes and sub-categories. Throughout the entire

process of analysis, I used the constant comparative method where main themes from each interview were compared to other interviews in order to determine the overarching thematic categories.

### **Ensuring Research Quality**

Creswell (2009) has identified several strategies that researchers can employ in order to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative data analysis. Three of these will be used in the proposed study: a) peer review and debriefing, c) member checking, and c) clarification of researcher bias. Peer review and debriefing will be an ongoing process. As I complete interviews and make entries and initial observations in my researcher journal, I will share these with my dissertation chair for regular peer review and feedback. Writing “researcher memos” to myself will be an important aspect of my sense-making of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I relied on my dissertation chair and faculty colleagues to act as peer debriefers as I worked through the code structures that emerged through my analysis. Insight from these discussions will frame how I re-visit the transcripts as I incorporated and coded additional interviews. Additionally, I discussed my findings with my colleagues, who are faculty members in philosophy, psychology, music, and education. These colleagues acted as sounding boards and provided feedback as I discussed initial theme categories.

Clarifying researcher bias was be an ongoing process. As I added entries to my researcher journal, I will need to be self-reflective about how I am interacting with the participants and the data they provide. One key element of this reflection was an ongoing self-awareness of my position in relationship to the participants, the research setting, and the subject of liberal arts education and online learning. The following section details my ‘positionality’ in this regard.

While I needed to be self-aware of my position in order to mitigate potential bias, my positionality served as a great asset to leverage in the quest for rich data.

### **Positionality**

Constructivist and interpretivist paradigms acknowledge that research is not an objective process where one can remove their personal bias from the study (Glesne, 2010). This section outlines relevant aspects of my position related to the study in order to acknowledge these influences.

Simply stated, the impetus for this project comes from my basic hopes and fears, both personally and professionally. I am fearful of the damaging effects that the Digital Age and digital technology are having on our communities, relationships, and daily lives. I am fearful that continued demand for online education will press liberal arts colleges to change in ways that sacrifice the valuable and defining features of these institutions that have historically enabled them to provide a uniquely formative educational experience for students. These concerns are personal to me because my academic background and identity is enmeshed with the interdisciplinary values and wholistic outcomes associated with a liberal arts education. In this way, I am quite vested in the research topic for this study. My own undergraduate experience was at Middleton. This experience significantly shaped my conceptions of what a good liberal arts education can look like. Because Middleton maintains its strong ties to its historical religious identity, this identity defined the particular flavor of liberal arts education that I experienced as an undergraduate. At Middleton, knowledge and competence are not viewed as passports to privilege, but instead are tools to be used for a life of service to others. My fear is that online learning might provide less transformative and wholistic educational experiences for undergraduate students.

Despite my concerns about what might be lost when education moves online and knowledge is viewed as a commodity, I am hopeful that digital tools and online learning environments can be better used to shape liberal arts education. My own experiences in graduate school have included online teaching and learning in various formats, many of which resulted in deep learning and new insight for me. Consequently, I am energized by a vision for what might be possible in online education. This combination of fear and excitement is what is driving me to better understand the relationship between liberal arts education and online teaching and learning.

In several ways, I am a member of the community that I am researching. I am similar to the faculty in that I am highly educated, and am committed to the liberal arts experience. With my faculty interviews, my status as a doctoral student was not an intimidating barrier to participants, but instead acted as a disarming point of connection with others who had completed a dissertation. For the faculty, my status as a previous staff employee at Middleton garnered trust in that I understand the unique campus environment, and wanted to represent their stories fairly. Throughout the interviews, it was clear to me that participants spoke to me as a member of the campus community, and not as an outsider. Since I am no longer an employee, I am free from power relationships with any of the participants. I am also a member of the student stakeholders because I earned my bachelor's degree at Middleton in 2005. This is a useful position to leverage because I have a familiarity with the educational experience, which helped me to understand the context and meaning of the various in group language that was used in interviews. However it is important to note that I graduated from Middleton before much of the digital revolution of the past decade, therefore the context has changed and I needed to be careful about imposing my view of "what was" with what "currently is." However, my position also enabled me to develop

the rapport, access to participants, and contextual knowledge that aided in my ability to develop an accurate analysis of the stakeholders being studied. Keeping autobiographical notes in my researcher journal helped to keep me accountable to attending to my positionality in this study.

## **Limitations**

Because all studies define and limit their scope through their design, all studies have limitations regarding the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Different methods are employed by empirical researchers in order to make different kinds of conclusions. Thus, it is important to acknowledge these limitations and be clear about the kind of conclusions that am drawing from this proposed study. The main limitation of this study is that it is concerned with a single institutional case. However, it is important to keep in mind that the goal of this study is not to make systematic generalizations to all liberal arts colleges or about the stakeholder groups. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, other studies have tracked national trends regarding the perceptions of various stakeholders regarding online learning. Rather, this study seeks to advance a conversation about the relationship between liberal arts education and online learning. Hopefully, this study adds to the conversation by adding depth to a particular aspect of the online learning literature. As noted in Chapter 1, this study leveraged a special case to identify factors and variables that can be empirically tested by future research. In this way, my study is descriptive, setting the groundwork for future theorizing and study. I have leveraged a particularly local case to add to a larger discussion of the proper roles that online learning might play in liberal arts education in the Digital Age.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS**

In securing a sample of administrator participants for this study, the goal was to hear from senior administrators who would be making decisions regarding the future of online learning at Middleton. Therefore, the participants in the administrator stakeholder group for this study consisted of the President, Provost, academic deans, and an online learning administrator at Middleton. Two of the three academic deans responded to my requests for an interview. The online learning administrator worked in the Middleton Information Technology Department, with a job title of Assistant Director of Teaching and Learning. Part of the online learning administrator's job was to work closely with faculty to develop and deliver new online courses at Middleton.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the administrators interviewed in this study were clear that they did not think that Middleton should deliver an entirely online undergraduate liberal arts education. In future chapters, we will see that faculty and students agree with administrators. No stakeholder group interviewed in this study thought that liberal arts education could be moved entirely online without undermining essential features of liberal arts education. The online learning administrator was the only participant in any stakeholder group in this study that thought a liberal arts degree could move online without the educational experience being challenged or undermined. Aside from the online learning administrator, the consensus was that purely online learning would undermine liberal arts education. When asked what would be missing in an entirely online liberal arts degree at Middleton, one dean laughed quite loudly before offering a list of essential experiences that he said would be missed. The Provost stated in

clear terms that “At a place like Middleton, undergraduate, residential, private, liberal arts, wholistic model of education, I don’t know why we would deliver an entire program online.”

Despite this resistance to entirely online undergraduate liberal arts education, Middleton had set up an online learning committee during the past year. The Provost explained to me that this committee was asking several basic questions, such as “What’s Middleton’s role in online? Why would we have it? What do we have to offer? ... What would be Middleton’s signature in online learning? ...” According to the Provost, they didn’t have a good answer to these questions, particularly the last one. The newly formed online learning committee was exploring these questions.

One main purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the degree of perceived compatibility between traditional liberal arts education and online learning. Because of the confusion and complexity involved in trying to define liberal arts education, it was important to start my interviews by having the participants elaborate on their understandings of the essential features and core purpose of a liberal arts education. These understandings determined the starting point for our conversations about whether online learning would support, challenge, or undermine liberal arts education.

Overall, the administrators in this study described a consistent understanding of liberal arts education that is best summarized by the President of Middleton:

[A liberal arts education] is the body of knowledge, set of skills, and a set of values that really sharpen and develop the whole person ... The idea, the root of liberal arts thinking was that this approach to learning, what it’s trying to do is give people the knowledge, skills, and values so that they can be intellectually free. Free of I guess, everything from superstition to poor logic, to misaligned values, and so at the core, that’s to me what it’s



about. It's cultivated in lots of in lots of discourses ... I include the sciences as well as the arts and humanities. It's very funny when I hear people use that term, they really mean lots of different things. And you've probably seen that.

The President organized the essential features and core purposes of a liberal arts education into three categories: a) knowledge, b) skills, and c) values. These categories encapsulate the curriculum, desired learning outcomes, and unique approach of liberal arts education described by the Middleton administrators interviewed in this study. Administrator participants focused on the following liberal arts values during their interviews: a) vocational formation, b) community life, and c) teaching. When asked to provide their understanding of the essential features of liberal arts education, administrators were most direct and explicit in describing the knowledge and skills that constitute a liberal arts education. Mastering these domains of knowledge and skills are the foundation for becoming good citizens. Administrator descriptions were consistent with the rhetoric being used to define liberal arts education in recent years. However, the various liberal arts values that were important to administrators became more evident in their interviews when they began to discuss liberal arts education in relationship to online learning.

This chapter is organized around the essential elements and core purposes of liberal arts education as described by Middleton administrators. The essential elements and core purposes are: a) liberal arts knowledge, b) liberal arts skills, c) vocational formation, d) community life, and e) teaching. This chapter portrays the extent to which administrators perceived online learning to be compatible with that particular feature of liberal arts education. The overarching sentiment of the administrator stakeholder group throughout the chapter is that online learning has the potential to undermine liberal arts education. Still, administrators did acknowledge certain cases where online learning could play a role in supporting liberal arts education.

One thing that is important to highlight before reviewing administrator comments about online learning is that other than the online learning administrator, the administrators who participated in this study had little or no direct experience with online teaching or learning. The Provost, who is late in her career, repeatedly commented on her lack of expertise in the area, admitting that “being the Provost this year has been the first time I’ve taken a look at [online learning].” The President had taught one online course at a previous institution; however none of the academic deans had any direct experience. Consequently, most of the administrators were forming conclusions about online learning from what they had read or heard from other colleagues.

### **Liberal Arts Knowledge**

Whereas the President, Provost, and the academic deans were quick to list specific knowledge areas that were essential to a liberal arts education, the online learning administrator’s comments were more general. For example, when asked for a description of liberal arts education, the online learning administrator replied, “For me it’s a well-rounded education. And if I could equate it to wholistic learning.” When pressed for specific essential parts, the online learning administrator said:

Good question. I think that’s tough to identify and the reason for it is it depends on what subject area you’re going into. And so the more broad your understanding of topics are, the more hooks as you learn in your area of study that you have to connect to... a benefit of this cross of the core of the liberal arts learning...also it give you more hooks and more connections so it increases [learning] retention.

Although the online learning administrator expressed that the idea of cross-disciplinary connections was valuable, he appeared less concerned about which courses should make up the essential foundation of a liberal arts education than the other administrators.

In contrast, every other administrator in this study listed specific knowledge that should be gained as a part of a liberal arts education. One dean said it simply, “There are also some things that you should just know.” When asked about the essential parts of a liberal arts education, administrators listed knowledge areas such as literature, philosophy, history, religion, science, languages, and social sciences. The Provost summarized the purpose of including these disciplines in a liberal arts education by saying students should:

...develop a sense of [their] place, a student’s place in time, amidst this sort of historical narrative, learning to think, and as you learn to think to realize that the ideas that you have actually come out of a long intellectual tradition, right? They’re not just coming to your head. But that you’re able to locate yourself in this grand story. Historically, philosophically, religiously, and that’s why history, religion, and philosophy are called the contextual [disciplines]. But part of that is also bringing in other things, like so we have social sciences, sociology, literature, art history, and those all also have a history. And so being able to see yourself in 2015 with a much bigger story. And being able to talk about that, think from that place, write from that place. That’s what [a liberal arts education] means to me.

One dean explained the purpose of including specific disciplines in another way. He said, “Within a liberal arts education, students need a grounding in the basic areas of human thought and achievements. And so at [Middleton] I think that’s got to imply a strong foundation in history, philosophy, religion...and science.” In other words, choices about which disciplines to

include in a liberal arts education matter. Knowledge from several arts, humanities, and sciences disciplines makes up the essential ingredients to forming a robust liberal arts education.

However, the purpose of studying these specific disciplines is not to simply acquire information. One dean explained:

You never think or work in a vacuum. You have to have a good knowledge base. So if you're thinking about liberal arts education, just in terms of knowledge base, does it really make a difference to know that Isaac Newton was born in 1642? No. But as part of a bigger package, I could expand on that one. That's also the year Galileo died. And then you've got the Roundheads that same year, and you can start to look at the full historical package on how science came about, and what was going on.

This dean went on later to say that, "you have to know some science in order to live as a contributing citizen in a technological society." In other words, gaining knowledge in history and science together results in a scientifically literate citizen who has the sufficient historical imagination to see beyond mere technical knowledge, and can see the significance of scientific thinking on the arc of human experience throughout history.

One reason why administrators thought liberal arts education would be undermined by moving a degree entirely online is that they did not believe that all courses necessary for a liberal arts education were compatible with online environments. For example, administrators said that science labs could not be moved online.

Any course, any program that has a large and complex lab component is not a good candidate for online coursework. I mean yea, there are schools that claim to be able to do chem labs online, but you're watching videos of the labs and you're not doing them

yourself ... you're missing the hands on component of that learning. So that's just not going to work.

While one dean thought physics would be a good candidate for online instruction, the dean with a physics background didn't think so. The dean who was a physicist said that the problem solving element of physics would be difficult to move to online settings:

I don't really know what is available for online instruction in physics. So much of it is problem solving. And I'm not sure how that's done online. It's like I'd want to make YouTube's of people solving problems, showing the whole process. A lot of people think it's just you solve the problem and submit the answers. No, I wouldn't even be satisfied seeing the write-up. At some point in physics instruction, you have to be walking through problems, solutions together. So much of the computer stuff, is Microsoft Word based, or text based. I mean you move over to diagrams and schematics, and I'm not very familiar with what's out there. I would have a hard time thinking of teaching Physics effectively online .... Even just drawing diagrams can be a real hassle on computers. It might look nice when you're done, but you're spending so much of your brain power on finding the little things and making the picture look pretty, rather than on the picture. We often teach students to use blank, unlined paper, because we don't want to be constrained by lines. Work with a pencil. Work with an eraser. Don't try and solve things and don't constrain yourself on lines. To think, you're constraining yourself to what can be done on a computer. It's really scarce.

For both deans, it was difficult to see how online learning tools could replicate certain learning experiences online. Neither dean had experienced online learning as a student or as an instructor. In later chapters, we will see that faculty and student participants in this study who had direct

experience with online learning had a much easier time imagining how aspects of liberal arts education could be compatible with online instruction.

Yet, both deans described cases when hybrid learning could work within a residential liberal arts education. One dean said a hybrid approach could work well in certain courses such as philosophy, history, and religion where the courses “are basically, you go home, you read the book. You answer study questions. You come back and discuss it in class. Those would go well online, particularly if they’re set up at night so that students have to discuss whatever it is they’ve read.” The other dean was particularly open to the idea of hybrid learning in saying:

If you’re willing to think in terms of online elements, hybrid, then there’s a lot of room for improvement in what we’re doing. My old online assignments, I did it because I thought it was an improvement, and flipping a classroom, having them watch a lecture before the class, I mean you don’t do that just because. You do it because you think it’s going to lead to improved use of class time.

This dean went on to say:

I do think you can do good courses online. Individual course level, not all courses. I mean how are you going to teach basketball? And I’m not sure how you would really do physics effectively, but if I worked on it, I could find a way. So I see value in individual courses. I see extra expense in individual courses, too. That’s my dean hat. But I’m not ready to go so far as wanting liberal arts programs online, because I think that the goals of a liberal arts education go beyond what you can get through online education. (pause) Too much of education leans toward technical education or just thinking in terms of knowledge. And of course if you think of it that way, who really cares if Newton was born in 1642. We can too quickly dismiss the knowledge. So you get a fuller picture of

what you're about, knowledge, skills, attitudes, preparing people for being informed and productive citizens. Those things that you're just not going to get through fully online instruction.

Therefore, it seems that some administrators at Middleton were open to the idea that students can gain some liberal arts knowledge through online or hybrid formats. This is a point of agreement with other stakeholder groups. As later chapters demonstrate, faculty were optimistic about hybrid learning and students expressed being pleasantly surprised with their online learning experiences at Middleton.

Administrators said that gaining knowledge in specific disciplines must be complemented by other essential elements of liberal arts education. The essential core of a liberal arts education, also includes developing skills, attitudes, and becoming a good citizen. According to at least one dean, developing these competencies should occur as students gain important disciplinary content knowledge. The following section of this chapter examines whether administrators thought the development of skills and values could translate well to online settings.

### **Liberal Arts Skills**

Administrators consistently described the development of specific skills when outlining their understandings of the central purpose of a liberal arts education. These statements were consistent with recent literature that advocates for the importance of liberal arts skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Chopp, 2014; Nussbaum, 2010; Roche, 2010; Roth, 2014). For example, the Provost said that the goal is “student formation, helping students to think critically, to write well, think well, to speak well, to form ideas, feeling the world’s ideas, those kinds of things.” Other administrators shared this emphasis on teaching students to speak, write, think critically, and communicate well. Some administrators referred to the importance of being able to analyze

visual culture as a specific form of analytical thinking. A few administrators included quantitative analysis and scientific literacy in the list of skills that a liberal arts education should develop in students. The President was the most specific in his list of liberal arts skills. He mentioned hypothesis testing, connecting evidence to arguments, evaluating evidence, understanding of genres and discourses of writing, being able to make an argument, and the ability to be persuasive. However, none of the administrators in this study directly addressed whether these kinds of skills could be easily learned online. From my observation, administrators were more fluent in describing the ideals of liberal arts education than analyzing how certain liberal arts skills might or might not be developed online.

While most administrators described the purpose of liberal arts education in terms of pushing students to develop thinking, communication, and analytic skills, some administrators explicitly connected their comments about skill development with the overarching purpose of citizenship education. Administrators pointed out that skills such as critical thinking, quantitative analysis, writing, and reading are the requisite skills for good citizenship. The President explained that historically, liberal arts education:

...was seen as a way to lift people up to make them capable of being free citizens in a democratic society, so they are capable of consuming news and arguments and critiquing [messages]. And so without that, you're not really free. You're really just subject to whatever the authorities, jurisdictions say, whatever the superstitions of the place and age are. I'm a political scientist by training, so I bring political models into that thinking.

Said another way, one dean proposed that, "within liberal arts, what you're really trying to get at, is to help people to live as contributing citizens. And that can include their professional work, but it's not limited to their professional work. It's full citizenship." This idea of freedom and good



citizenship anchored the administrators' understanding of the core purposes of a liberal arts education. Administrators acknowledged that the skills required for free citizenship can change, depending on your context. In the words of one administrator, the essential parts of a liberal arts education are the "core competencies that you have to have if you're going to function as an educated person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." This dean stated:

The ideal of the liberal arts goes back to antiquity .... It's the idea of freedom. These are the skills that a free person has to have in order to function as a free person. In whatever society, right? And so far as the ancients were concerned, that meant the skill in rhetoric and reasoning.

This dean pointed out that some of the skills needed for free citizenship in 21<sup>st</sup> century were different than those during antiquity. For example, one administrator reflected that whereas liberal arts education in the ancient world did not include the study of empirical science, basic familiarity with science is critical for living in a highly technological society.

At the same time that administrators said that citizens in 21<sup>st</sup> century society should possess skill in scientific and empirical reasoning, administrators did not say anything about the skills that are necessary for citizens to navigate the digital dimension of life in the Digital Age. The Digital Age has birthed new venues for interaction and public discourse through the Internet. For example, some scholars say that mobile devices and the Internet have facilitated social uprisings against totalitarian regimes, and have been a key ingredient in the spread of democratic ideas around the world in recent years (Hussain & Howard, 2013). In other words, mobile phones and information technology might be key ingredients in a "modern recipe for democratization" (Hussain & Howard, 2013, p. 48). Further, citizens in a 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy must learn to manage one's digital and social identity (Bauman, Marchal, McLain, O'Connell, &

Patterson, 2014; Turkle, 2011). Administrators missed the digital aspects of citizenship in 21<sup>st</sup> century society, revealing a major blind spot in how that group thought about the relationship between online learning and liberal arts education.

Although administrators were quick to list the skills of speaking, writing, reading, quantitative analysis, scientific reasoning, critical thinking, and communication skills as necessary outcomes of liberal arts education, they did not specifically discuss these skills in relationship to online learning. In other words, administrators did not comment on the degree to which many of these skills might be learned online. For example, administrators did not speculate on whether students could develop certain skills online that are not overtly social or interpersonal, such as empirical reasoning, hypothesis testing, or interpreting visual culture could be taught well online. New lines of research should measure if online and hybrid formats are able to develop these kinds of skill outcomes.

It is worth noting that again, the online learning administrator's comments were in contrast to the rest of the administrator group. The online administrator did not list any specific skills that would be essential outcomes or purposes of liberal arts education. Instead, the online learning administrator focused on the desired outcomes related to one's major and of finding one's vocational calling. In this way, the online learning administrator's comments were similar to students, who had a much less specific understanding of liberal arts education. In contrast, administrators and faculty were very specific regarding what skills they believed were essential to liberal arts education. Administrators and faculty were consistent with each other in how they described the essential liberal arts skills of thinking, writing, and communicating.

## **Vocational Formation**

One concept that every stakeholder group in this study talked about was the idea of vocation, where people understand their various roles and responsibilities in life as areas where they are being called by God to serve. The strong emphasis in the idea of vocation and calling was evident in how administrators spoke about their own careers. Several of the senior academic administrators at Middleton had not actively sought out their leadership positions. Instead, they had not considered administrative leadership roles until after being encouraged by others to apply for administrative positions. For example, one of the academic deans said that he got into administration, “Kicking and screaming. I was asked and encouraged to put my name in the hat. So I did, and here I am. I never wanted to be dean. Never really crossed my mind to do it.” The Provost described the path to her position this way:

... being a dean or provost ... is never what I aspired to be. I loved teaching ... A dean position came open and I had no interest in it at all. In fact I didn't know that there was a dean search going on until nominations. And people encouraged me to apply and I didn't get that, but I finally thought, “okay, maybe there's something to this.” ... So but that was kind of the end I thought. In fact, I was thinking that I would probably retire... when the Provost thing came around again. It was the same kind of experience. I didn't aspire to be that, and yet when you get these... when notes or emails coming in say, consider this, I finally had got to the end of my ability to figure this out and decided I needed to go through the process.

Another dean described arriving at an administrative role as a result of feeling a sense of “calling.” With respect to academic administrators at Middleton, my observation was that the leadership culture of the academic administrators consisted of people who felt a responsibility or

sense of call to move out of teaching faculty positions to take on leadership roles. These participants are administrators who were previously committed to their teaching positions, but were pulled into administration by circumstances. Administrator participants understood their administrative work in terms of “vocational calling,” which is an important idea that shapes the environment and discourse at Middleton.

The importance of vocation in the culture and orientation of Middleton contributes to the assumption that liberal arts education should be more than an economic transaction of time and money in exchange for marketable knowledge and skills. One administrator pointed out:

What people don’t understand is that well, because we’re a liberal arts college, we have been loath to embrace the model that what we’re offering is a product and that students and their families are consumers. They’re paying us for a product. We hate to talk that way. Students and their families think that way.

In contrast to a prevailing credentialist mentality in contemporary higher education, a core value espoused by the administrators at Middleton is that students are encouraged to find or explore their vocations, literally callings and life purposes from God. Although this has a particularly religious accent at Middleton, the high value of exploring vocation and purpose is a consistent value across the liberal arts college sector (Roche, 2010). Administrators talked about Middleton being a place where students explore where God may be calling them in life, be it professionally or otherwise. One dean explained that “learning, faith, citizenship, all [contribute] towards vocation.” So not only do students develop the knowledge and skill to be informed, contributing citizens, but students also derive existential and spiritual meaning from their learning. This value was evident in administrator comments about hoping that students would develop particular attitudes and commitments as citizens. Good citizens, in other words, should

be actively responding to a call to service. Administrators in this study were resistant to reduce liberal arts education to a credentialing system where knowledge and skill are treated like commodities for the marketplace. Instead, administrators pointed to the importance of outcomes such as vocational formation.

One dean spoke directly about how he believed moving to online undergraduate degrees at Middleton would undermine the pursuit of citizenship education and vocational formation:

While you could get the knowledge base [in an all online liberal arts program], you may be able to cultivate the critical analysis, there is person to person interaction you would lose ... For me, there's a face to face element that is just so important in the development of an individual. And so I look at my own education. It's not just what I learned in the courses, it's the relationships with the professors. And as I look at my experience as a professor, and a really important part of it is my relationship with my students...we're not just wanting to cultivate people who can interact through a computer. The ideas of vocation, of being good citizens, of being workforce ready, requires person to person interaction. So I think that going fully online would undermine some of the goals of the liberal arts education.

It is possible that this dean was not able to see beyond his own previous experience. However, it is important to note his position, which states that competency in face to face interaction is a required skill for being a good citizen, and is a critical part of how people try to discern where they are being called to serve.

When asked to be more specific about face to face interaction, this dean responded by saying:

Well even if I wanted to sell you something, I have to be able to read you, and see your response, even in a discussion like this, we make eye contact. We do facial inflection. We do body language. And those things don't come through electronically. But to really be successful, and I don't mean successful in that you make a lot of money. Being successful in vocation and a citizen, and so forth, interpersonal skills are important. And those happen in face to face interaction. All along the way. And of course sometimes then, the relationship can go really deep...and I suppose you could get some of that [in online] as well.

Statements such as these implied that vocational discernment and citizenship education are inherently communal processes. This dean spoke about the way that face to face interaction helps students to develop certain skills for citizenship, but also acknowledges the value of student to faculty relationships. The other stakeholder groups agreed. For example, comments from the student participants in this study affirmed the role that personal relationships with faculty had played in discerning their own vocational calling during college. Additionally, it was clear from interviews with faculty and students in this study that each stakeholder group shared a commitment to learning outcomes that went beyond credentialing or skill development. These are elaborated on in later chapters.

### **Community Life**

Although the bulk of the online learning literature focuses on the academic experiences of students, the administrators in this study often referred to the importance of campus life beyond the classroom, and of the community of learning that Middleton aspires to be. Comments by administrators implied that students at Middleton would be “known” and as one dean said, students are not going to be a “nameless face in the crowd of 1,200 taking a course. You will

actually get to work with professors who will know your name and know a little bit about you ideally.” Other administrators described the importance of faculty relationships with students and the importance of co-curricular experiences in student learning. One exchange with an administrator indicated the high status that community life beyond the formal classroom has at Middleton.

*Administrator:* Besides the whole interaction with the faculty, and the in depth learning, and the relationship building, and the modeling, and the mentoring...oh mentoring, that would be an important element...then you’ve got the whole co-curricular experience, athletics, be it competitive with other schools or through intramurals, being part of a musical group, being in a play, sitting with others in the coffee shop discussing your courses! The sorts of student life engagement things that are done. There’s a long list of things in the college experience. I think the challenge is keeping the right balance between the academic and other things.

*Interviewer:* So just following up a little bit further then, you’re kind of saying, you’re having a hard time seeing mentoring, modeling, social interaction, because theoretically you could put that all online, right? Theoretically, people could be in a chat room, they’re not physically drinking coffee together. So theoretically, you could try to do these things online, but it sounds like you’re saying, well...

*Administrator:* (Smiling, chuckles) It’s not going to work! It’s like a long distance relationship with a spouse. (laughs). You can do it for a while...But I can really see a place for having online courses. Online individual courses, even for Middleton

undergraduate, summer courses, during the semester too, where for students for one reason or another, just can't be part of a face to face. Do it online. And I think some courses would work better.

As we have seen, administrators in this study believed that an entirely online degree would undermine essential elements of liberal arts education experience such as co-curricular learning and mentoring relationships. At the same time, administrators also made room for some formats of online learning for some situations. The hesitation is not to add online components to one's education, but rather the hesitation is to subtract face to face community interactions from the equation. For example, when asked about what it would take to design online learning in a way that would most closely align with the liberal arts mission of Middleton, the Provost said:

Well I think it would have to have some kind of hybrid. I mean because part of what we talk about here is that learning happens in the classroom and outside of the classroom. So you have the whole student life experience as well. So how do you account for what happens in terms of learning in the residence halls, or in chapel, or in athletics? When none of that is probably going to happen, you're not going to live...I doubt you would live in a residence hall and take your entire program online. I don't know why, maybe that happens.

From these words, it seems that the Provost is willing to allow for hybrid learning because it would preserve campus life, not necessarily because she is convinced it would improve the educational experience. Even the online learning administrator, who said that all of a liberal arts education could be put online, acknowledged the challenge this might pose to the sense of community at Middleton. He said:



For me as the director of the online courses here, one of the constant struggles that we work with, or are challenged with, is face to face community versus online community. And I could speak to what's near and dear to my heart and that would be my kid. And if my kids were to attend and get a degree in online, the piece that would be missing I feel is that living community. And the opportunity to live in the dorms, be able to wake up in the morning and to see fellow brothers in Christ, sisters in Christ, have the ongoing communication, the social and the topics that are discussed pertain to enriching your understanding of where the Lord's [vocational] calling is.

According to the online learning administrator, community would need to be developed online in order to compensate for the absence of face to face relationships:

I would like to see online learning move more towards a wholistic approach also. Where the courses are not just separate courses but they're interdependent upon each other and there's also pieces associated with that project or expectations for them to participate in the community with their colleagues or peers. And I think all of that can be accomplished online.

The online learning administrator went further to say:

The objectives can be accomplished. Where we find the undermining is in the values of what Middleton holds true. So we might say the non-negotiables of integration of faith and learning. That's a component that can be more difficult to integrate. And there's not necessarily metrics or measurements that are associated with it. We do measure that in our online courses and we hold instructors accountable for it. But because we can measure it, and we hold them accountable. We don't necessarily measure or hold instructors accountable in the face to face. So with that being said, I guess that would be

an area of weakness that online learning may not be able to accomplish unless you have those communities or those supplemental programs in place that the students are required to participate in.

As we will see from students in Chapter Six, the on-campus environment is fertile ground for co-curricular learning. Student participants emphasized the importance of face to face interactions and co-curricular learning in their own liberal arts education. Still, openness to hybrid learning was a consistent finding across stakeholder groups in this study. Administrators were willing to allow hybrid learning options and a small amount of individual online courses as a way to make room for online learning while also preserving the co-curricular learning community, which was described as essential to liberal arts education.

## **Teaching**

Comments by administrators underscored the high espoused value of teaching at Middleton. One dean described Middleton's commitment to good teaching by comparing his colleague's experience teaching a course for University of Phoenix against how Middleton would handle online teaching:

I have an acquaintance who has taught at the University of Phoenix and the way he describes it, you know he's called three days before the semester begins and is asked "do you want to teach this course? We need someone to teach this course." You know he's done essentially no prep for it. It's basically him talking about what he does and how he solves these problems in his job... He's an accountant. So he takes the online teaching materials and basically does...here's how I apply this principal, you know with my work. So it's not very intentional the way he describes it. The feel that I get for it is very jerry-

rigged...His experience with Phoenix isn't a terribly happy one. He did it for the money.

And you know he was glad to have that extra money, but he found it kind of frustrating.

The dean continued by saying that Middleton would tell a faculty member in February:

Would you teach this course, starting next January or next February? About a year to plan. And we'll let you teach it once to a small number of people, which is what we do...just to get the kinks out so you know what you're in for when 30 people enroll, right? So that's the way we do it here. Or at least that's the way we tend to do it. Because it's a part of your regular load in the semester, so you know, this is one of your three courses. Don't make a hash of it. (laughs). So get the kinks out, and then if it works, then maybe it can become a regularly scheduled class, or maybe it can be a summer class for those who are distant.

This example exposes the differing priorities between institution types. Whereas schools like the University of Phoenix value profit, schools like Middleton prioritize student learning.

Institutional values and culture have a significant relationship with the classroom experience of students.

Administrators described three ways in which online learning would undermine good teaching in liberal arts education. First, good practices of teaching such as faculty feedback, accountability, and student performance are diminished in online settings. Second, online learning does not offer the same quality of interactive learning that face to face environments can facilitate learning, and that is essential to liberal arts education. Third, given these two assumptions, the availability of online courses at competitor schools has the potential to further undermine liberal arts education through transfer credit. The ease of access to online learning at other institutions has the potential to greatly increase the number of courses that students at

liberal arts colleges earn from outside the institution where they are pursuing their degree, slowly undermining the integrity of the degree.

**Feedback, accountability, performance.** One administrator said that crucial elements of learning, such as faculty feedback, accountability, and student performance were diminished in online settings. One dean explained how this would undermine a liberal arts education:

I don't see how you can say, do French 101 online where there has to be give and take with the instructor in French, in real time. Students need feedback on things like accent, or idiom, or any number of things. I mean, the difficulty of programming a computer to do real language in real time, those difficulties have not been overcome ... I knew a guy at Illinois, which is a huge artificial intelligence school. He did both computers and language pedagogy. And he worked with Bill Gates for a while with Microsoft, in that area ... He's a German prof. And his test was always to translate the phrase, "the flesh is willing but the spirit is weak" into whatever language it was. And the results were always comical because you've got two different...it's a metaphorical statement. It's not a literal statement, right? And the results have been comical. Computer programs now, the algorithms have gotten better at recognizing metaphors and those sorts of things, but they're not perfect by a long shot. And you know, the language instruction software that's out there is getting really a lot better ... but there comes a time when you can listen to all the drills, and try to imitate, but you really need feedback from someone from an instructor. And I could see putting French 101 or 102 online. I can't see getting the same results that you get from a four hour class that you get where you actually have to perform on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, in class. And you know, you're frankly under the lash. Right? If you're the student. I mean you have to show up and you have to

perform. You have to be prepared. And online there's not that lash. Or at least it's a wet noodle. The fear of humiliation is a great spur to learning and hard work in face to face classes. That fear is greatly diminished online, or else it's nonexistent.

Again, the online learning administrator expressed a different and more optimistic point of view regarding instructor presence and student accountability in online learning: He believed that instructor presence and student accountability could be improved through online learning. He said that learning outcomes are improved when online learning environments increase instructor presence and student accountability. The online learning administrator explained in his response to my question about whether online learning could enhance liberal arts education:

Yes. I mean that's been my answer for a number of years otherwise I wouldn't be invested in it. However I'm pleased that research is now coming out that supports that. Babson report came out and suggested that many online courses now have higher learning outcomes ... I guess the online courses that I'm speaking to primarily have a high level of instructor presence. I'm not talking about correspondence courses. So I guess my answers will pertain to a higher level of instructor presence. And those types of courses tend to have a higher level of accountability, which when the rubber meets the road, is very similar to working out. A workout regimen. If you have a high level of accountability and a high level of affirmation or support for the work that you invest, you tend to get better results.

The online learning administrator cited examples of increased faculty presence in online courses at Middleton. In these cases, faculty taught asynchronous classes online, but made themselves available to their students "twenty four hours a day." One faculty member committed to responding to every student question electronically within fifteen minutes, no matter the time.

If the student question warranted a longer answer, sometimes the professor's initial response would be quick, with a more in depth email response later. The online learning administrator then pointed to higher ratings on course evaluations in the area of "connecting with faculty" for this professor as evidence that asynchronous online learning could improve faculty presence. Interviews with students in this study found that students in online courses appreciated this kind of thorough asynchronous feedback. At the same time, faculty participants expressed how time consuming it can be to provide this kind of feedback. For some students, this individualized feedback was described as a strength of online education. However, these students still said that they preferred face to face learning over online learning. The online learning administrator was the only administrator who stated outright unequivocally that online learning could be an improvement to liberal arts education.

**Face to face interaction.** Many administrator comments centered on the idea that there is something unique and powerful about face to face classroom interaction that cultivates deep learning. Therefore, moving away from these interactions entirely could undermine the depth of learning that occurs. One administrator explained:

Well, one of the concerns a lot of people have, and I share it, is if online learning is going to be replacement for face to face interactions, group learning, person to person interacting, seen as a replacement for that, I think what you're going to get is a much thinner type of learning, rather than a richer type of learning. And what you risk also is making the experience so individuated, so individualized, that it furthers the atomization of culture. People ... don't have the benefit, in certain ways that online learning can be constructed, of the kind of interaction and challenge that happens in a classroom with different kinds of people. Now, of course I could be denying and perhaps folks could

overcome that, but my concern is that it's going to be much more superficial and people won't know what is lost. Because they will have taken the course. They will have gotten the credit, but they won't know what it could have been. And there is something that's magical that happens in the classroom, in learning at a high level. There's "aha" moments, and sometimes it comes from listening from a professor, but very often it comes from a dialogue or conflict or disagreement. And artful teachers bring those out in the students in the moment, in a real time sort of way.

When asked to elaborate on the differences between face to face interactions and technology mediated interactions, the President cited neuroscience research on interpersonal relationships.

I think some of the answers may lie in the field of neuroscience... we know that when you see someone that you like, and you have a positive interaction, that there's a hormone called oxytocin that's released in your system. And when you're under stress there's another hormone called cortisol that actually can do harm ... I also know the research is indicating that that doesn't happen to the same extent with these [technology] mediated experiences. It's not closely related to online learning, but they've looked at communication in relationships and that's how that works. So maybe that's the scientific answer.

Aside from the online learning administrator, every administrator in this study spoke about the importance of not abandoning face to face classrooms entirely in undergraduate liberal arts education. Still, administrators said that some elements of online learning could be added without undermining liberal arts education. The administrators explained that a hybrid approach would take advantage of the potential affordances of online learning without abandoning the

crucial elements that are present in a face to face settings. For example, when asked whether she thought that online learning could improve a liberal arts education, the Provost commented:

Possibly. To the extent that it really does allow engagement with a faculty member. I think that's great. My questions about it come when that faculty member is teaching a class of say 30 students, and that the idea that this is just between me and the instructor is a pretty not specific idea, I mean it's pretty misguided. So it's not clear to me how the faculty member always engages with the student in online learning. I know there are models where the student, you know the flipped classroom, right? The faculty uses technology to either lecture, or does a lot of stuff outside of class, and then the inside class time is more higher level thinking. I could see that getting quite an interesting deal. I think there are a lot of things that happen in the classroom today that don't need to happen. And so they could happen outside the class, leaving the time in the classroom for discussion, right? Do really dig deep, to delve deep into an idea. And they get the content outside on their own, that really is quite intriguing to me.

Despite strong advocacy for face to face learning, administrators believed that the importance of face to face interaction could vary depending on the particular learner. Administrators said that for some learners, online learning environments could work well or would even be ideal. Administrators listed the following types of learners that they believed would do well in online settings: introverts, graduate students, and independent, "very motivated students." In discussing introverts, one administrator said:

Part of the benefit of a small classroom is that you get the opportunity to not only engage with the faculty member, but other students, right? I mean learn to discuss ideas with students and defend a point of view or argue for a point of view, how that happens online



isn't always clear to me. I can imagine it happening online through discussion boards. I could also see it be a great opportunity for a student who needs a little time to think before responding, right?

This administrator went on later to say, "I'm more of an introvert, so this idea of taking a class by myself in the library sounds like a great idea to me. But I'm sure that's unique." She then shared about her own undergraduate experience where she said:

The first time that I was ever called on involuntarily in class was when I was a senior. I got away for four years, just sitting in the back row...being able to just take it in, and think about it, and wade in...so for introverts, I think there's a lot to be taken."

The President demonstrated similar thinking when reflecting:

I also think that for a student who is reticent to participate [in class] verbally, who may not have the strong verbal skills, speaking skills, that [online learning] could be great. I've taught one online course ... and it was kind of a hybrid model. We'd get together and have discussion, and there was a woman in the class who when we were together never said a word. But she was the most thoughtful and engaged person online. And what was fascinating to me is the flip side of the coin is the students who are very comfortable with the verbal discussion, struggled to post well, to post consistently. So it was kind of an interesting thing, but it did seem to give voice to the population of students that might be overlooked or seen as not strong students. And so, you take some people that for whom the social environments and social context of learning is very difficult, online learning can be a gift for them.

He followed up these comments with an example of a family member who has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, and who was thriving in an online environment because this person found the social context of a face to face classroom to be "upsetting."

Clearly, administrators said that face to face interaction is a physically stimulating experience that differs in important ways from online interaction. For some students, being in the physical presence of others can be overwhelming or stressful, while other students may draw energy from the presence of others. Administrators were willing to consider hybrid learning options because it would allow instructors to experiment with different combinations of learning in solitude and community.

The idea of interactive learning was a central theme throughout my interviews with each stakeholder group. The administrator group identified this central theme; however the faculty and students elaborated in more detail about their experience with interactive learning, particularly about the relationships between online learning, liberal arts education, and interactive learning processes.

**Competition and transfer credit.** One dean observed that competition from online learning options outside of the liberal arts college sector could undermine the quality of the liberal arts experience for students at places like Middleton. The dean predicted:

If the big names like MIT, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, UCLA get into [MOOCs and online learning] seriously, it's going to force the rest of us to do the same thing because, are we going to turn down [transfer credit], like a history of science course from MIT, just because it was taught online? What if the student aced all the tests? MIT is not going to give credit so to speak in an online course without some kind of effective learning...Are we going to turn down a course from MIT? It's going to be hard to do

that... If this method of education becomes popular and widely available, to students across the country, it's going to put a tremendous amount of pressure on our core courses in terms of enrollment. If we give credit to that student who took that basic, history of science course from MIT, that would count toward a science core course here. Well that's one less student who would be taking a Middleton science core. Are we going to do the same thing for English 101 in a freshman first year writing? I don't know how you would...technically it would be easy to grade, submit and get a grade for an online essay. It's just sending an attachment to an email, right? You know the quality of the feedback that a student gets is going to vary tremendously. But how are we going to deal with that? Are we going to let students take the equivalent of English 101 at the University of Chicago? Well, the time is coming when we'll have to make that decision.

This dean described both an economic and a curricular problem for liberal arts colleges and liberal arts education. From a financial and administrative point of view, competition could undermine liberal arts college enrollment and tuition revenue through transfer credit of online courses. The online learning administrator reflected on how Middleton's high commitment to teaching and learning might influence their ability to draw enrollment revenue:

One of the drawbacks to students [taking online courses at Middleton], which we recognize and probably it affects our market share is students sometimes just want to take a course and get the grade. And find the easiest way to get the grade and have it on their transcript. Middleton's not the place they're going to want to go with that. That hurts our market share, but that's not something that we value. We value the instructor presence where some students might say "you know what just give me the course, let me learn it and be done." And that's not something that we allow students to do.

However, transfer credit of online courses poses a curricular and pedagogical problem. If high quality liberal arts education requires face to face interaction, then allowing online courses to be counted for transfer credits could adulterate a student's liberal arts education experience. Some liberal arts colleges have policies that prohibit awarding transfer credits for online courses, however this is the exception. The problem of determining how to award transfer credit is not a new one. As one dean pointed out, the idea of liberal arts education can vary between institution type. To make his point, he described a 1,200 student mythology lecture course at a research university and observed that many institutions would count this mythology course as a core course in their liberal arts program. He observed:

“It's the way you do a liberal arts education [that is distinctive]. It's not a hard and fast definition of liberal arts education that's going to hold across the entire industry... cause there's all sorts of different definitions of liberal arts education as you know. There are industry standards but they're very minimal.”

Liberal arts colleges have already had to determine how they would accept transfer credit from other institution types, however the ease of access to online education could exacerbate the problem of an increasingly incoherent or atomistic curriculum.

### **Chapter Summary**

In summary, the administrators in this study offered a collective definition of liberal arts education that is characterized by a set of knowledge, skills, and values. Together, these essential elements of liberal arts education encourage students to develop into good citizens in democratic society. The knowledge gained through the study of traditional liberal arts disciplines such as literature, philosophy, history, religion, physical sciences, languages, and social sciences enables students to be more informed and “free” citizens in society. Further, liberal arts education helps

students to hone critical thinking, writing, and communication skills that are necessary for citizens to contribute to society. Finally, essential elements of a liberal arts education include vocational formation, community life, and good teaching

The basic thesis of the administrator group was that online learning can undermine liberal arts education. This basic thesis is repeated by faculty and student stakeholder groups.

Administrators believed that some essential knowledge cannot be gained online. For instance, administrators did not think that some essential courses, such as science labs, could be moved online. Particular aspects of other courses would not translate well either. For example, one dean pointed to the difficulty of trying to demonstrate problem solving processes in physics by using digital tools.

Administrator comments did not directly address the relationship between liberal arts skills and online learning. Although administrators could quickly recite the essential skills that should be gained through liberal arts education, they were much less fluent in speaking about how these skills might relate to online learning. Administrators described the importance of general skills such as critical thinking, reading, writing, and speaking. They also described specific skills, such as hypothesis testing, connecting evidence to arguments, evaluating evidence, making an argument, and the ability to be persuasive. Still, none of the administrators speculated on how online learning might undermine or encourage the development of these skills. One dean mentioned the social skills necessary for good citizenship. However, administrator comments about citizenship education did not include attention to unique aspects related to citizenship in the Digital Age. Administrators did not address questions of how the Digital Age might require new skills for people to thrive as citizens. Consequently, administrators did not engage in a conversation about how online and digital learning

environments might uniquely be positioned to cultivate new skills. Administrators did not cite anything from the growing body of literature that has begun to explore the social and cognitive skills or “digital literacies” necessary for life in the Digital Age. (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Jenkins, 2009).

In discussing the essential elements of vocational formation and community life, administrators highlighted student to faculty relationships and co-curricular learning. These are aspects of interactive learning, which is another major theme and essential element of liberal arts education that emerged in interviews with each stakeholder group. In addressing good teaching, administrators said that online environments lack the same opportunities for feedback, accountability, and student performance that face to face environments provide. Additionally, face to face interactions in class uniquely spur deep learning in ways that online settings cannot.

Although administrators were closed to the idea of an entirely online liberal arts education, they were open to hybrid learning environments. Another consistent theme across stakeholder groups was that hybrid learning was more promising than online learning. However, administrators were *cautiously* open to hybrid learning. Their openness to hybrid learning was not because they thought it would improve student learning. Instead, they were open to hybrid learning because they believed that doses of online learning would not undermine critical elements of liberal arts education such as vocational formation, community life, and good teaching. Online learning could be good for courses that focus heavily on mastering a body of content knowledge. Hybrid courses could provide students with flexibility, but would still ensure that interactive elements of a course happened in face to face settings. In Chapter 5, we will see that faculty were also open to hybrid learning, but for different reasons. Whereas administrators said that hybrid learning could be pursued without undermining quality, some faculty said that

the quality of hybrid courses could surpass that of face to face courses. Several faculty participants in this study had the advantage of being able to draw from their direct personal experiences teaching online and hybrid courses to give a more precise analysis of how to leverage the affordances of online and hybrid teaching.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FACULTY**

As a stakeholder group, the faculty interviews resulted in the most comprehensive and in depth discussion of the relationship between online learning and liberal arts education. Whereas administrators gave elaborate responses to questions regarding the essential elements and core purposes of liberal arts education, they were limited in their lack of experience and familiarity with online learning. In comparison, students gave simple definitions of liberal arts education. Student responses illuminated how well the abstract ideals of liberal arts education were being translated to real student experiences, either online or in person. Even if students had not taken an online course, they had direct experience interacting with others in informal digital environments. In some ways, faculty were the link between the administrators and students. Similar to the administrators, the faculty were all highly trained in their disciplines, and could give eloquent statements about the ideals of liberal arts education. Similar to students, many faculty had close familiarity with the dynamics at play when trying to learn online.

Most faculty participants approached the question of online learning as a novel pedagogical phenomenon that warranted careful investigation. In this way, online learning seemed to be something to be explored rather than feared or avoided. In their interviews, faculty demonstrated their skill in critical analysis as they discussed the extent to which faculty believed that online learning could support, challenge, or undermine the essential elements and core purposes of liberal arts education. In comparison to the administrators, the faculty had much more clear and specific definitions of online learning. Also, faculty had more clear and specific ideas of what online liberal arts education could look like. At the same time, faculty were better



than administrators at naming specific elements of liberal arts education that could be undermined by online learning.

The first main section of this chapter is organized according to the essential features of liberal arts education identified by faculty participants. These features are not in conflict with administrator definitions, but there is a stronger pedagogical emphasis in the features that the faculty participants identified. The essential features of liberal arts education identified by faculty participants in this study are: a) a multi-disciplinary approach, b) liberal arts skills, c) embodied learning, d) faculty to student interaction, and e) student to student interaction.

This chapter has two main sections. The first main section of this chapter examines each of these features in relation to online learning. As a group, faculty participants identified ways in which each of these elements could be undermined by online learning.

After illustrating these features and their relationship to online learning, the second main section of this chapter takes a pivot. The second section outlines the ways in which faculty made room for online learning to play a role in liberal arts education without undermining essential features. First, faculty observed that regardless of whether a course is delivered online, student and faculty characteristics play a large role in whether the course is effective. Second, faculty listed several examples of how the Internet can be leveraged as a tool to supplement face to face instruction. Third, some faculty believed that well-designed hybrid courses could improve a liberal arts education. Fourth, some faculty offered examples of where online learning could uniquely support liberal arts education. One basic thesis that is woven throughout faculty comments in this chapter is that liberal arts education requires embodied pedagogy. This embodied pedagogy is critical to developing a multi-disciplinary perspective, but is also critical to forming relationships and developing specific liberal arts skills.

## **Essential Features Undermined by Online Learning**

### **Multi-Disciplinary Approach**

When asked to define a liberal arts education, faculty participants were quick to list the specific liberal arts disciplines of history, philosophy, classics, English, and science. Some faculty also included the arts and social sciences in this list. Whereas the administrator participants tended to emphasize the importance of the knowledge gained from taking liberal arts courses, faculty tended to emphasize the importance of the disciplines themselves. English professor Charles pointed to the difference between knowing content from a discipline and understanding the different ways of knowing embedded within the liberal arts disciplines:

To me that [liberal arts education] means that the students who graduate from Middleton will have deep experience looking at the world from multiple points of view. Through the perspective of multiple disciplines. They will be able to look at the world as a scientist. They will be able to look at the world as a philosopher. They will look at the world as a historian, a religious point of view. It means that we'll be engaging the world from multiple angles. Anyone who graduates should be able to do that. So that means not just different types of knowledge, but different ways of thinking. And I think that the virtues come along with that. You get different virtues by looking at the world in different ways.

History and Classics professor Jinsol said it another way:

To me, liberal arts, the best of what liberal arts represents, is students learning from a multitude of different disciplines. All of the different disciplines, students are getting exposure to how those different disciplines think, how these disciplines ask questions and try to answer them. And I think the sum of the whole then, as students receive exposure to the sciences, to the humanities, to the social sciences, that the sum of those educational

experiences is what makes their education meaningful and worthwhile. And it has to be multidisciplinary. Because, the liberal arts represents the entire spectrum of these academic disciplines, and if any major area is neglected or de-emphasized, I think that spells real trouble for what a liberal arts education is.

English professor Sarah added that:

I think to me [liberal arts education] means a wholistic approach to thinking about preparing students for the widest possible engagement with the world. So it means being, perhaps not interdisciplinary in the sense that it's all mushed together, but the in the sense that I do think it's important to understand things from an historical point of view, literary point of view, philosophical point of view, psychological point of view, so that all of those things end up being in concert together to really produce the kind of student that has the most rigorous ability to do critical thinking. Rather than something that's deeply specialized, even in one of those fields. I think that the way of thinking about the world and organizing knowledge, too that I don't see myself as necessarily preparing for specialist knowledge, but so in an English context, I'm looking to prepare lifelong readers. Instead of folks for a graduate program. Not that those are antithetical, but I do think the liberal arts orientation says...everyone knows that the idea of liberal comes from 'for a free people.' I think that's important, right, that there's this kind of civic responsibility there.

Faculty offered examples of how they incorporate this multi-disciplinary approach from within their own disciplines. For example, Bennett professor of history, explained why a study of history should be part of the essential core of liberal arts education:

Well, as a historian I would say history (laughing). Not only because it's valuable to understand... One of my colleagues has a tag line on his emails. History equals how today got here. And I think that's a very appropriate way to view history. But also, history because it's a discipline that encompasses or can encompass a variety of other disciplines or disciplinary approaches or subjects. So when I teach my oral history course for instance, I bring in pieces of research from psychology, biology, geology, geography, art history, architectural history, philosophy, religion. What else? Political science. I have some of that in there. I do economic history. I have students drawing charts of economic history and so forth. So there are a lot of different things that go into reading literature, that go into a really well structured history course I think.

Latin and classics professor, Donald explained why understanding Classics is foundational to a liberal arts education:

So a liberal arts education is a study of the ancients. Greek. And it's not the study of them for primarily practical purposes, that is to make you a better rhetorician, or to make you a better lawyer, or to make you a better doctor...it's the study of the Greco-Roman tradition because of a belief that things that have survived are the things that are most important. And so if you want access to the great minds of the past, we have to learn to speak their language. So if you want to study Plato, Cicero, or Virgil, or Homer, and all those who depend on them, all through the late antiquities to the medieval period, to the Enlightenment, to the present, you have to know their language.

In her comments about the essential core of a liberal arts education, Jodi, professor of art and art history, offered an example of how studying the arts disciplines fosters a creative way of thinking and approaching problems:

I think essential [to a liberal arts education] for me is to push a student towards understanding what it takes to be creative. To be a person who entertains new ideas or a person who entertains diversity. The willingness to accept the other or accept things that are unfamiliar. I think that's essential to a liberal arts degree.

In these examples, studying art, history, and the Classics goes beyond gaining knowledge in those areas.

According to the faculty participants, one of the purposes of liberal arts education is to equip students with the various ways of knowing embedded in liberal arts disciplines. In other words, the goal is for students to be able to approach the world from the perspective of a social scientist, historian, artist, philosopher, or story teller. This includes mastering content knowledge in these areas but goes beyond this. Therefore, the task for liberal arts education is not only to impart knowledge, but to use liberal arts disciplines to introduce students to a multiple ways of knowing. There is a subtle but significant difference in this multi-disciplinary approach described by faculty and the emphasis on knowledge and skill described by the administrators. This is an important distinction to make with respect to the question of online liberal arts education. If the project of liberal arts education were only to master content knowledge and a set of skills from a range of subjects, then moving coursework online might be less controversial for faculty. As we saw in the previous chapter, administrators were more comfortable transmitting information and some skills online, but not with pursuing other outcomes such as forming good citizens and understanding ones' vocational call.

In turning to the question of online learning, faculty thought that some individual courses might work well online. However, faculty did not believe that disciplinary skills could be learned online. Faculty first stated that the discipline and goals of a course would influence whether it

was compatible with online learning. Regarding individual courses, faculty listed technical skill development and content delivery courses as being the most compatible with online learning. For example, Katrina professor of education, said:

So I think research would tell us that the most cost effective online courses are those where a skill set remains a little bit unchanged and then you continue to give that same module over and over again without reconstructing the course. So the structural design of the course is completed...so let's say a language for example. Everyone still have to learn this set of grammar and syntax and this vocabulary, so it follows the same trajectory semester after semester. There's change in maybe the examples and some extraneous change, but supplemental work. But the course stays basically the same because there's some type of skill development to follow along.

Philosophy professor Kyle said it another way, "if it was a math course, or I can think of other sorts of courses, a language course maybe, a non-spoken language where it's really skill oriented where you have to master some skill. I could see how that would work." Charles elaborated further:

I mean I think the Internet is a tool. And tools are usually designed to do a certain set of things. So the Internet is primarily designed for information delivery. And some aspects of a course require that. If I want to teach my students to talk about a sonnet, part of what that is, is getting the information to learn about what a sonnet is. The Internet excels at delivering that kind of information. It's not very good at human interaction. And in a sonnet, ideally, there should be some interaction between the views of its reader and the views of its author. And that's easier to facilitate if I try to impersonate the sonnet in the class. The Internet doesn't do that as well. Now you can use the Internet to do human

interaction. You can get chat rooms. But I mean you can hit a nail with your wrench, too. It'll work. You can drive a nail with a wrench. There's a better tool for that. There's a better use for the tool than hitting the wrench with it. So I think it's the aspect of any discipline that is primarily information delivery, that works really, really well online. And I wouldn't say that there's a huge, I mean I wouldn't say that there are absolute differences in the disciplines. So, English is kind of a softer discipline, and it's a lot more about human interaction. But there's still information that has to be delivered. There are some of my colleagues, who have taught foreign languages online, I think there's a larger chunk, especially in the introductory courses, that really is relatively objective information. The lower level math courses... So yeah, there are disciplinary differences.

According to faculty participants, the Internet is an acceptable way of delivering some content. However, trying to gain a multi-disciplinary perspective is a different task that cannot be accomplished entirely online. This requires a kind of interaction that is not easily moved to online environments. For example, when asked what would be missed if students could earn an entire philosophy degree online, Kyle said:

I think you'd miss everything. You'd miss the discipline of philosophy. It would be like...I'm not exactly sure how this fits...but I think of the analogy of someone who wanted to see Oxford University and they took the person around, and they showed them the admissions building, and they showed them the gym, the athletics building, and the guys says, "I don't want to see those things, I want to see Oxford." Or the idea is, that is the university. When you see those individual things you're seeing it. But this is sort of a reverse thing. You can take all the courses and miss the discipline. Because the discipline, so much of the discipline is embodied communication, questions, answers,

dialogue, challenges, responses, and that is very hard I think, maybe not impossible, I haven't figured out how to do it yet, to accomplish online.

In this way, the faculty understandings of the purposes of liberal arts education influenced their attitude toward whether that kind of education is compatible with online learning. Certain knowledge and skill can be learned online, but liberal arts education requires the learning and practicing of multiple disciplines, which is hard to replicate online. As Kyle observed, the sum of a liberal arts education is more than the various pieces that constitute the liberal arts curriculum.

To summarize, faculty participants described liberal arts education in terms of a multi-disciplinary approach. This approach emphasizes the importance of studying liberal arts disciplines in order to learn multiple ways of knowing and approaching the world. Some faculty expressed concern that this kind of learning would not translate well to online settings.

### **Liberal Arts Skills**

As students gain multi-disciplinary perspectives, they should develop skills that characterize a liberally educated person. Consequently, faculty participants described a core purpose of liberal arts education as being skill development. Consistent with administrator comments, faculty listed the skills of reading, speaking, and writing as essential outcomes of a liberal arts education. Jinsol's comments were typical of faculty participants:

I want students to learn how to read critically. So they don't read anything at face value, okay. But then have the kind of questions, toolbox of questions, that one should ask when reading any kind of source. Whether it be an ancient source, a modern source, a newspaper. And I suppose even like a work of art. Even something in a lab. They need to be able to read things critically. I think people need to...the take aways from a liberal arts education...they need to be able to articulate their ideas.



Other faculty comments centered on the idea of developing “inquiring minds” in students where students become “lifelong learners” who have the capacity for critical reflection, analysis, and the desire to explore difficult basic existential questions about life purpose and vocational callings.

Some faculty comments expressed concern that online learning environments can undermine the ability to learn certain liberal arts skills. Although administrators and faculty listed the same skills that should be learned in liberal arts education, the faculty participants made more precise connections between how certain liberal arts skills might be learned in certain online environments. For example, one liberal arts skill described by Carol professor of history, was that of empathy. According to Carol, the study of history should develop an empathic way of being. The skill of empathy is crucial to flourishing democratic citizenship. She explained that a rich study of history will enable students to develop empathy for people in other places and times. However, Carol pointed out that developing the liberal arts skills of empathy and analysis are more difficult to cultivate in online learning environments:

One thing that you wanted to ask me about was about how the essential elements of what liberal arts is, may or may not fit online. And that’s particularly interesting to me.

Because I think what I’m still working on or trying to figure out is how to integrate the important aspects that come out of classroom discussion in particular about empathy and analysis. How do you build that in to the online experience, which is more solitary? I mean sure you have forum posting, right? And people respond to each other. And if we have our Blackboard collaborate session, they can see each other and kind of...but it’s not the same thing. It’s not the same thing as hearing in a classroom different people

present different ideas. And there's something about that richness of the classroom experience that I'm still trying to recreate that I haven't really figured out how to do yet. When asked if she could pinpoint why these two environments are different, Carol responded with:

I think that it's the sitting and hearing somebody present different ideas than yours. So when I teach the Reformation at Middleton, it's a topic that we cover in our core class. And we're teaching the Reformation, and to some of my students who come from a particular kind of background, of course the Reformation made sense. Of course Catholicism was corrupt. Of course it needed to be reformed, "cause don't you know Catholics aren't Christian?" And I had up to a third of my class when we started, that thought the Catholics weren't Christian. Okay? Now, that classroom dynamic, going in certain direction is completely changed when a student raises his hand and says, "Hang on a moment. I'm Catholic. I'm not an idolater and I don't worship the Virgin Mary." You know, and you've got to correct your assumption. That is a wonderful experience that starts to teach students empathy. Well they start thinking, hang on a moment, this preconception that I may have worked with, or that I've been taught or that I've heard from family members all my life...had never questioned it...now runs into the lived experience of someone who comes from that group and who says, "Hang on a moment. You need to correct your assumptions." It's harder to recreate that online. It's harder to have the immediacy of that particular impact. And that's really what I value about the face to face teaching, which I find is harder to recreate online. Now, I will say that I have crafted assignments that challenge students enough to a certain sense that they really do start thinking about things in a different way.

*Interviewer:* But that's more of a person interacting with an idea?

*Carol:* Correct, rather than a person interacting with another living, breathing, flesh and blood classmate. Or a professor, or someone who has an idea that really isn't familiar. And making them think. Sometimes in a classroom you can see the light bulb go on. Online, it's a little more difficult to make that happen. And that's both in terms of the development of empathy, which is one of the things that I highlighted, but also the ability to sort of practice again and again how to ask the "why" question. I think that part goes better, but the empathy thing is a little harder to recreate in a same way as you do in the classroom.

Carol's comments are important because they illuminate the challenge of developing certain liberal arts skills, such as empathy and critical questioning, in online settings. Still, Carol and the faculty participants did not specifically discuss how critical reading and writing might be taught online. However, Carol's comments about empathy and critical questioning are important because they highlight the importance of embodied, interactive experiences in pursuing liberal arts education. In the above example, observing the physical reaction of a classmate when one expresses a thought is a key ingredient to developing empathy and the ability to interact in social settings where difficult questions are being addressed. When discussing the essential core and central purposes of liberal arts education, faculty pointed to the importance of the disciplines, and of developing particular skills. However, when faculty were asked to discuss liberal arts education as it relates to online learning, embodied learning repeatedly surfaced as an essential

feature of liberal arts education. Again, these comments were much more precise than the administrator comments.

### **Embodied Learning**

Faculty consistently revealed their high value of educating the “whole person” in liberal arts education. Faculty participants in this study referred to wholistic learning to mean physical, bodily, or “embodied” education. Surprisingly, faculty did not talk about embodied learning in co-curricular settings, despite their use of the terms “whole person” and “wholistic learning.” Although faculty missed the co-curricular layer of embodied learning, they did emphasize the physicality of learning in a way that was not by administrators. According to faculty participants, this wholistic education should engage the physical body, but also the heart and mind. For example, Jodi said:

What [liberal arts education] means to me is that the college is very concerned about the whole person. And you know that sounds like a cliché in some respects when we talk about liberal arts. But the fact of the matter is that when we learn, we learn using all of our sense and all of our brain capabilities. And in fact when we are at the height of learning, so when we’re doing the best learning we can possibly do, all parts of the brain are active. And all parts of our systems in the body.

Charles said it another way:

A liberal arts education really takes into account the whole person. As an English major, I just hated the fact that there was a physical requirement. I was interested in the things of the mind and I’m at a college for crying out loud! It’s supposed to be about your head! Why do we have to jog! But a liberal arts education does improve that because the body is part of the person. And I think that there is something about...you know I always want

my students in a literature class to participate. Not just with their minds, but with their hearts. I say, if something that you're reading is funny, you've got to put a smiley face in the margin. The fact that it's funny isn't irrelevant. It's part of the point. So you've got to participate with not just your mind but your heart, what lives inside of you as well.

A few faculty participants referenced “wholistic” or “embodied” learning when they were initially asked to define liberal arts education. However, the concept of embodiment and embodied learning became a central theme as faculty discussed the potential compatibility of liberal arts education with online learning. One of the main concerns that faculty expressed about online learning undermining liberal arts education is that online learning was “essentially a disembodied experience.” Some explicitly used the term “embodiment” when discussing liberal arts education and the learning process, while others used terms such as “physicality” or “real place” to describe embodied learning. Faculty expressed concern that disembodied learning results in learning experiences that are more abstract and less real, which can undermine liberal arts education.

Kyle a philosophy professor who regularly teaches an online course at Middleton explained:

In my view, and I know not everyone shares this view, but in my view, online delivery is essentially a disembodied experience. And I discovered that I think my [online] students are less respectful...because they never have to sit in that chair and look at me. And they can communicate in ways that if they looked into my eyes they would not communicate.

English professor Charles who has taught an online literature course at Middleton said it this way:

“It seems to me that [an online] degree could easily become more ethereal. Just sort of out there. The subject matter is abstract. The people who hold different views on the subject matter, they are abstract as well, cause you never have to actually see them.”

Even Katrina who was enthusiastic about the benefits of online learning, stated a word of caution about entirely online undergraduate degrees:

I think [students] would miss something. I think when we do talk about embodiment, and the experiences of your physical person being in relationship with another person or people, you can do lot of different things, but there is something tangible I think in the human need for relationships that require more than a screen to mediate that...that relationship or that experience. And so at the undergrad level where we are developing critical thinking skills, where we are asking them to probe and to try out these really rich questions, and to step out on a limb, and try and figure out then, in the midst of this learning, who are they as well?... There is something about the face to face embodied experience in a relational sense that helps develop trust, the experiences, and things that I don't think 100% online, you would be able to get. ... I think if everyone I knew, I knew through this computer, there is something I'm missing. I think we were made to be in relationship with one another. And although I can do a lot with technology, that basic relationship does mean something, and I think our body just viscerally understands experiences in a face to face classroom on a face to face campus differently than an experience...that somewhere we have to ground that knowledge, that learning, that questioning, in some type of a physical experience, an embodied experience with the world and with other people. And not through the medium. I think there's a big fear that

we all of a sudden start to think that this...what we see here, this abstract representation of the world, is the world.

Again, this is where the faculty were more specific than administrators when talking about face to face interaction. Face to face discussion is important, but Katrina spoke about the need to develop trust within a group before good critical thinking and discussion can happen.

Incidentally, trust is a key theme that students identified when discussing their preference for face to face discussion over online discussion.

Jodi offers an example of embodied learning in art, which addresses the differences between digital and “three dimensional” experiences in learning where purely digital experiences could undermine liberal arts education. When asked about how online learning might undermine liberal arts education, Jodi responded by saying:

I don't think I can respond to that generally. I can only respond to it specifically, and that would be with the arts. Okay. So yes, I think there is an undermining. Let me give you an example. You've got your little kids, two little girls, and they are sitting and they are playing with blocks. Three dimensional aspect going on. There are people who argue that they could learn the same things if they were sitting behind a computer and pretending to...doing the block building. Drag and drop and all that kind of thing with the mouse. I dispute that because I don't believe that that is the same kind of learning. I mean, yea, you might be dealing with shapes, but you have no physicality about that. You can't put your hand around the block and move it forward on a spatial level or on a three dimensional way of things online. So I think depending on what it is you want to be teaching, to my mind, if you say to me, that's just as good for them to be sitting behind a

computer and learning to build blocks as it is to be sitting with a bunch of blocks, right there in front of you, I would say that's not true.

Art is an example of embodied learning where students develop physical skill skills. Yet, Jodi also explained that there is a social, interactive aspect to her courses that is best experienced in the physical presence of others. She said:

I think that a lot of the artistic experience has to do...I agree that you can be an artist and you can be in your studio and never talk to anybody. But personally, I believe that the artistic experience and why we create artifacts is a communication process. It's all about communication. And I don't know that I could experience that kind of communication like sitting in the classroom and having a critique together, looking at each other's work, walking around each other's work, interacting with people about the work, can be completely duplicated online. Yes, we could take and put the image online and we could do a critique. We could do that, and that could be valuable. I'm not disputing that. But I don't think it's as rich and I don't think the learning is as complete if it's not done physically. So that's another limitation.

Jodi identified another limitation of online learning by comparing how she has observed her students react to digital images of art and an original piece of art.

Another limitation, and I've seen this in kids, so you've done a unit with your kids on Picasso, and you show all these fabulous images, and they're really big. You know, they're on a big screen so there's no reason for not having the full impact, right? These same kids, who have experienced that in the classroom...them going to a museum and seeing a Picasso is a whole different experience. And again I can't find the words completely for that. It's like me having gone to the Georgia O'Keefe museum and



standing in front of one of Georgia O'Keefe's paintings and being just absolutely emotionally overwhelmed by that because she touched this. She created this. This thing. Never, have I had that kind of experience through books, or through online. And that to me really stands out. And again, I haven't sorted that out completely yet.

If studying and experiencing art are essential elements of liberal arts education, then Jodi's comparison of original art and digital copies are particularly important. Faculty in other disciplines also emphasized the physical aspects of learning. For example, Jinsol spoke about how a physically embodied experience in a classroom can contribute to the formation of memories or "memorable experiences" in ways that online courses could not. Jinsol talks about the quality of the face to face classroom that is lost when moved online.

For example, the formation of memory, memories, right? I think when I teach, certain things become memorable to students, right? And hopefully it's not stupid jokes that I'm saying, but actual content, you know. And they get multiple sensory reinforcement of particular ideas. It's aural, it's what they hear. It's visual, it's what they see. And I wish there were other things that I could do too, like you could smell something as part of it too, but I think the formation of memory in the setting where you have real time teaching, versus the formation of memory with the kind of mediated device, I think it's different. I really do. I really do. And again, maybe I'm just drawing on my own anecdotal evidence. The way I learn, let's say reading, and listening to a lecture or seeing a place, with all the things going around me and in front of me, versus behind a computer screen. It's different for me, so I imagine it must be different for a lot of people, too.

In different ways, faculty pointed to the physical experience of learning, or “embodied learning.” In doing this, faculty participants pointed to a qualitative difference between technology-mediated interaction and embodied physical experiences.

Anderson’s (2008) model of online learning acknowledges the qualitative differences between digital and face to face interaction. However, faculty comments in this study direct us to consider the physiological aspects of online learning. More research should be done to explore how students physically respond to and experience digital environments and interactions. According to the faculty participants in this study, the disembodied nature of online learning could have negative consequences for liberal arts learning. Thus, further research on online learning should consider how factors identified by faculty in this study, such as trust, personal relationships, art, and multi-sensory experiences relate to particular goals of liberal arts education, such as empathy, critical questioning, education for citizenship, reading, and writing. Further research should investigate how online learning impacts wholistic learning by measuring the spiritual and affective aspects of online learning.

### **Faculty to Student Interaction**

Several faculty participants expressed the importance of embodied pedagogy in their own face to face classrooms, implying that embodied teaching and learning was essential to a liberal arts education. A major part of this embodied pedagogy involves direct interaction between faculty and students.

**Performance energy and spontaneity.** History professor Bennett who never had taught online, spoke about the performative element of his teaching:

I was asked when they were first starting online courses at Middleton. This was about three years ago. And that was just when I was starting as honors program director and I

thought I can't handle that too. And I was actually willing to do it. And I was interested in doing it. I see that there are opportunities there... You know, the thing that I had my qualms about is when I teach, it's the thing I love about teaching is the performance and the interaction and the energy of a classroom. And that was something I was wary of, is that, how would, that that would just be absent, I would think from an online course... Talking about the energy, recently I had a class where I could tell the energy level was just drooping. And so I knew I had to crank things up. Where I exaggerate points, and I'm becoming even more demonstrative. I feel just wiped out at the end. And usually it's the case where I just have to spend like a half hour on Facebook. My brain is fried and I'm just pooped out. So I put a lot into it (laughs). A lot of energy into teaching.

Later in his interview, Bennett elaborated on how he re-enacts historical events in class. On the first day of class each semester, Bennett warns his class that he "will stand on the table, wrestle students, stab people," and do his best to engage students to make history interesting. Carol also described a performative element to her classes. In her example, she described her re-enactments of the trial of Joan of Arc:

So in the assignment, they have to write a paper on, they have to become a character in the book. They have to become her parent, they have to become the King of France. They have to become the Queen of France. They can't be Joan. They can be anybody else. And we re-enact her trial, okay. And so I have like 5 people who are the kind and 5 people who are her parents, and three people who are her Squire. And I dress up, ok. I come in in costume as the trial lawyer. And they have to make their case, why or why not Joan should be condemned. Very hard to redo that online.

Still, Carol was open to trying to translate those experiences online. She said:

I mean maybe you could if you could figure out a way to get everybody online and get them all dressed up and so on. [In my online class] I did offer them the opportunity to video, and that was pretty fun. We had two students to a video where they actually brought in a horse as well, which was great. A real horse. She's in the equestrian club. So she has her horse turn up. And it was great. I mean that was good, but even that doesn't quite get to the same classroom situation where, ok, now we're going to re-create this trial. [In my face to face class] I brought in like medieval treats for them, and they had all sorts of things. Try to make that happen. You can't quite do the same thing online. I mean, honestly, teaching, good teaching, a lot of it is showmanship. Okay, you have to be the kind of person who likes to be with people, likes to be in front of people, and getting that across online is more challenging. ... Even teaching face to face, I think in the 18 years I've been doing that, has been a little more difficult because our students sometimes, not all of them, but some of them, coming to class looking at you, the teacher, as if you are an electronic something in their mind. And they may or may not be paying attention because you are not real to them in the same way. Because they've had so much time where they're watching a video or they're doing some other thing. So they don't necessarily come fully engaged is what I'm saying. Even in the classroom setting.

Jinsol also described the performative element of his class while but highlighting the importance of spontaneity in the learning process. This element, according to Jinsol, would be hard to translate online. He explained:

My pedagogy is old school, right? So teacher to student. And teacher to student involves constant interaction. And I think in the real time classroom setting, the quality of that interaction I think tends to be higher than the kind of interaction that you can get in an

online course. And that's for a variety of reasons. (pause) When I lecture, my lectures involve, lectures are performance, okay? So not only are we conveying information, delivering content, but professors are in the business of performing. And that includes gestures, expressions, movement, and all these kinds of things that I think are part of how we communicate and convey our knowledge to our students. I don't know if it's possible to offer that same kind of performance in an online context. Even if I'm being video-taped, I feel like there are things that happen in physical proximity and in real time, and every time someone teaches, it's different. That too, there's a kind of spontaneity that is a part of teaching that is in some ways I think missing from an online context. So those are things that I think I find challenging about trying to do the same thing with online learning. And there are all these other questions, too. Like student engagement with the course. Is it qualitatively different in a classroom vs. a screen? And I would say it is. And again, the kind of, manner in which knowledge is communicated to students, I think for those in a classroom, it's going to be different than those sitting behind the computer screen. It seems to me that it just will be. Maybe I'm totally wrong.

Jinsol continued talking about the spontaneous element of his teaching, which would be missing in asynchronous learning. He also underscored that spontaneity is a crucial ingredient to good learning experiences, which would be lost if moved to asynchronous online environments.

[You lose] the spontaneity too. If I as a professor was preparing an online course, and let's say the online content included videos of me teaching, right? That's one strategy. So what I imagine is, if I were to prepare something like that, I would prepare what I hope was a good lecture. And then presumably, that same lecture, I'm going to use in subsequent iterations of the same course, right? So in some sense then, students will see

me teaching about Greek history, in this period, the same way for eternity, right?

Whereas when I teach it in a class, and even if it's the same class, the same topic, okay, there is difference every time I teach that. And I think the differences are in a lot of ways driven by how students react to what I'm teaching. They may ask a question. They may want to look at a source. They may want to follow up, challenge what I said, okay. And I find in those moments when we're interacting, in real time, that those are where I learn something new, and hopefully students learn something new. And so then if it's just sort of static video lecturing, you lose that spontaneity. And I think those spontaneous moments are also locations for learning that are different every time.

The above examples from faculty participants propose that embodied faculty performance is important because of its power to draw student into the subject matter, and because the performance itself is a way to connect with and respond to students. Some faculty and administrators said that content delivery could be put online. However, the energy and spontaneity described by Bennett, Carol, and Jinsol demonstrate that a lecture can deliver more than content. The performance of a lecture or classroom interaction is a form of modeling where faculty demonstrate curiosity, excitement, caring, and embody a liberally educated person for students. According to Jinsol the embodied performance and spontaneous interaction of the classroom can influence student motivation. He explains:

What I've found in terms of online, and again this is all anecdotal. I don't have any data. But the motivations that students have for taking these courses, I have generally found to be, as quickly, as efficiently, and perhaps as cheaply as possible, fulfill a given curricular requirement. And so if their motivation for taking an online course is already rooted in speed, cost, and disengagement in some ways, then I think it's already a lost cause. And

so I have found that being a teacher in a classroom, sometimes I have the, and only mean sometimes, have the power to convert interest. Right? I can get a student who thought he or she hated history, hated a given subject, didn't care at all, and by the end of the course, they love it. I've gotten those!...I think it happens through that performance thing. And I don't want to sound arrogant, okay. But good teachers have the ability to really make students excited about those things, for a subject they hated, especially in high school. And I can't do that in an online setting. I just can't. I don't know. Even if it was like a Facetime, Realtime chat, even in that sense, I don't know if I could offer the same performance that leads to interest that I could do in a classroom setting... I am physically exhausted after teaching a lecture, because there is this performative element. It's not just robotic delivery of content.

Even in a synchronous online interaction, Charles observed that these environments are disembodied formats that detach cues such as student body language from the interaction:

There are more practical things about looking at students' faces, which I mean really good video chat technology...the stuff I used was pretty decent...you can see their faces and hear their voices. It's really just not the same. Difficult to see posture. Where students sit in a classroom tells me something about them. And you could say where they choose to pipe in for the chat could tell you something, too, the one who is in her living room with her toddler crying over in the corner, that tells you something about that person. But there is something about a classroom dynamic that I have not seen online. The physical things I think, especially in a discipline like English where it's a part of the Humanities. It's useful to have the human body in the room. Expressing themselves with gestures, postures, with their hands. A lot of that goes away.... I mean I do a lot more

lecturing, but I walk around when I lecture and get closer to students who seem to be drifting off...It is important to be there in terms of eye contact. It is impossible to make eye contact online. Cause if you are in a video chat with somebody, and she's looking right into your eyes, she's not looking at your image on the screen, she's looking into the camera, right? It is literally impossible...maybe Google Glass could do it...but (laughs). But that really basic thing is difficult.

If instructors rely on the physical cues of students to adapt their teaching, and to become more spontaneous in order to connect with the interest and motivation of students, then online interactions that are void of these cues can undermine the learning experience. The spontaneity and ability to ask professor questions during class was one reason that students in this study said they preferred face to face classes over online environments. For students and faculty, the desire for embodied interaction went beyond the classroom.

**Faculty to student relationships.** Faculty pointed to the relationships that can develop between students and faculty members. In reflecting on his own undergraduate liberal arts experience, Donald spoke about the role that faculty relationships played in his learning as a student:

One thing that stood out for me a lot was the personal habits and schedules of the professors. And there were times where a professor of mine befriended me, and there were times outside of class, in their homes, in the dining hall, things like that. Those were times of personal enrichment. I don't think those are really possible in an online setting. Or at least they're very different. And that's something they would miss out on. The speed of interaction. Right? It's much faster in person. Tone of voice. All of these things are difficult to do...communicate electronically. Maybe I'm hopelessly behind, my



knowledge of technology. But a lot of the communicating that I do in the classroom...contain subtle sarcasm and facetiousness...or at least I think it's subtle. And you really try to enlist the audience in the classroom, the students in the world...and it's hard to do online. Those are some of the things they would miss. But that's about all.

Donald iterated his reliance on the physical dynamics of communication in his classroom, but also noted how these elements are central to the development of relationships with faculty mentors and role models beyond the classroom. As we see later in Chapter Six, some students described their relationships with faculty members as critical to their experiences as students. Deprived of these relationships, faculty in this study worried that students would lose motivation, become anonymous, and lose the sense of belonging and connection that comes from strong faculty to student relationships.

### **Student to Student Interaction**

Faculty participants described student to student interaction as a catalyst for good liberal arts education. Many of the faculty concerns about online learning undermining liberal arts education were born out of concerns regarding how online learning would influence student interactions. Faculty described student to student interaction as essential to the liberal arts experience. Several faculty participants observed that rich student to student interaction can foster learning. Jinsol represented the faculty group by saying:

Part of my courses is getting students to talk to each other. Right? So it isn't always just faculty to student. But there is a lot of space for learning that happens student to student. And again, all those other elements that I mentioned about performance, and aurality, and the physicality of learning, yes, students can interact via online means, messaging, chat,

whatever. But I think there is something lost there. And student to student learning is just as important a part of classroom learning as faculty to student.

Together, faculty identified aspects of student to student interaction that are ingredients to deep learning. These aspects are: a) commitment, b) trust, c) community, and d) vocational meaning making.

**Commitment.** English professor Charles stated that face to face classroom learning environments require a sense of commitment that is important in setting up “the intellectual work of the class.” He proposed that:

I think students who make a commitment to being in the same room, literally, physically in the same room with other people at the same hour of the day...that’s an investment. That’s one way in which they’re using their bodies as a part of their education. And I think the level of commitment drops when the physical piece isn’t there.... I think the classroom, it’s a commitment in time and space. And I think that’s a discipline. So the classroom desk, those are unnatural, but it’s a discipline. It’s something uncomfortable, it’s something that they’re forcing themselves to do, and I think that helps to enforce commitment to the intellectual work of the class.

**Trust.** Carol suggested that face to face environments facilitate a sense of trust, which can be the gateway for a class to delve into asking hard questions of one another and engaging in liberal arts learning. Trust paves the way for critical analysis. Carol reflected on her experience trying to facilitate student interaction in her online history classes:

I think that there is something that you lose [in online courses] by not having the ability to bounce ideas off each other in person. That aspect is lacking. And it’s not always so, but in the best case, in a classroom setting where you have worked with the students for a

while, and trust builds up, you can ask the hard questions and have people willing to engage with each other. Some of the best classes, if you can make it work, are when the prof steps back and the students talk to each other and really wrestle. It's harder to do that I think in an online setting. I mean the forum postings that I do are fine. But honestly, I ask them to respond to each other and it's very hard for them to do more than say, "that's interesting you made a good point." I think, again a classroom dynamic can go the wrong way and can be a shoving down dynamic rather than an opening up kind of dynamic. But in the best situation, if you have an issue that they really grapple with, then you get that kind of deep thinking, kind of pausing in thought, of "I think this, and I think that, or maybe this or maybe that," and we work out something together. And that's very difficult to recreate in an online setting. That's what I miss the most. That times...and they're almost like moments of grace...boom...in the middle of your class. And you can't always predict them. You can't always plan them. You can't always engineer them. You can do your best to prime them, but they don't always happen. When they do happen, it is absolutely wonderful. And I think the students really remember it. Harder to do that online.

It seems that online discussion forums simply don't result in good interactive discussion.

Education professor Katrina pointed to the centrality of developing trust in communities of learners, which can be maintained to some degree online, but which are best forged, at least initially, in face to face relationships.

**Student Community.** Trust and commitment in a classroom contribute to a sense of community between students. Some faculty described the importance of developing a sense of community among student in order to cultivate a rich liberal arts education. The establishment of

a sense of student community in the classroom is important because strong community and relationships between students can be catalysts for deep learning.

For example, Kyle who teaches online philosophy regularly, says that teaching philosophy online “is just not the best way, not the best delivery, because philosophy is best done in community, in conversation, and it’s an embodied practice.” When asked what is lost when a philosophy course becomes disembodied, Kyle responded by saying:

Well, there’s no conversation! I have lectures that are up there online. They’re not like me droning on for an hour and a half. I break them up into like 5 minute chunks. And put them up there and they can watch them at their leisure and as many times as they want. But I’m never, never do we, there’s no back and forth. There’s no dialogue. There’s no conversation. Now I supposed you could run the course differently and you could mandate, look it’s an online course, but we are going to meet virtually, once a week or twice a week or something. I think that would be, I think the reason students taken an online course is so they don’t have to do that.

Strong student communities have the potential to exert positive social pressure on students that results in more “momentum and energy” for students in the classroom. With respect to online learning, Donald pointed out that:

There’s no social pressure in an online class...being on Middleton’s campus, I know there are some students in my courses who are there only because the social pressures compel them to be there. It’s the parents or classmates, maybe even the social pressure that I exert.”

Jodi talked about social pressure in terms of energy and momentum:

The other thing that I worry about [regarding online learning] is momentum. People give you momentum. The fact that you have to come to the college and talk to people, and to physically enact something with others, you get an awful lot of inspiration and momentum that you and your computer might not necessarily... What do they say about Phoenix or whatever... or even these MOOCs right? Thousands of people will start, nobody finishes... But you don't just get the same energy. People give others energy... and I see it with these kids all the time. They come in and they're pretty low for whatever reason. And the rest of the class generates for them, some energy that pulls them through that, when you're home, and with your computer, isn't... [There's] the embodiment piece. That's how I would describe it. God put us in bodies. He made us physical. He made us thrive as embodied people. I think we do our best learning as embodied people. And I think when we think about online, we've got to keep that in mind.

Carol described the physical presence of others as exerting positive social pressure:

There's something motivational about everybody's handing their assignment in on Thursday in class, that even the less motivated get with it. Whereas if you're doing it online, it's awfully easy to just let things slide... It's a bit like being on a diet. On your own vs. in a group, right? You've got the support group atmosphere. You've got the sense that we're all in this together.

Philosophy professor, Kyle said it this way:

Well, I think [online learning] at least challenges... maybe just part of a liberal arts education... but it's not fronted, not sort of a fronted part of a liberal arts education, but it's constitutive of a liberal arts education, a background thing. But that would just

be...what would you call it?...sort of socialization. And how to talk to people. How to talk to...how do disagree with someone who's sitting next to you. How to listen. That is challenged I think in online. At least the way my course is run. Maybe there are other ways to do it.

*Interviewer:* Are you saying it's harder to learn to disagree with someone when you just post a disagreement, versus, I say it and I watch your face?

Kyle: Yup. And there's a real time sort of interaction. And I think even if we were on a computer, you and I, and we were Skyping each other, there's still something between us that is something meaningful between us that isn't so great.

Therefore, according to faculty, face to face classes are better than online environments at establishing trust and commitment that builds a sense of community among students. This community can create positive social pressures. This social pressure can give students energy, momentum, and motivation. Strong communities of commitment and trust also enable students to learn through disagreement and to practice the kind of critical questioning and thinking that is a hallmark of liberal arts education. As Carol said, online interaction, such as discussion forums, just do not seem to produce the same quality of student discussion and interaction as face to face classes.

**Vocation and meaning making.** Bennett said, "Students want to interact with real people in real places." He supported this claim by describing his time leading an off-campus program for Middleton students in Hungary. As the director of the off-campus program, Bennett

supervised a cohort of students who enrolled in a course taught by him, but were also enrolled in courses at a local Hungarian university.

*Interviewer:* Are there important aspects of liberal arts education that students would miss if they would earn an entire degree online?

*Bennett: (Responds very quickly).* Oh yea, the personal interaction... Since the time of Socrates, the lecture, the question and answer discussion has been the foundation of education. Go back to Confucius, so it's in different cultures. We're not going to give that up. It works (laughs). And people do have a desire for that kind of interaction... When I was in Hungary... we had a lot of excursions and stuff. And in the weeks that we had excursions I would cancel the class that I was supposed to have because I figured we're going to have an excursion. I'm going to do a bunch of teaching during the excursion. And toward the end of the semester students were complaining, they were saying "why are you cancelling class? We want to be in class." And it was interesting because they lived in a dorm in a Hungarian dormitory. They lived on the floor. They were all together. They spent a ton of time online, you know to be connected back to their friends. They spent a ton of time together. They would go out into the city in different directions, but it was pretty much a life of being online, and going to the club. So that was the bulk of their experiences in their spare time... So it was pretty much Skype, Facebook, and going to the club. And they... even the students you would call mediocre students... they wanted to be in class. (laughs)

*Interviewer:* What were they drawn to, you think?

Bennett: The structure I think. They wanted structure in their lives (laughs). And I don't know if it was necessarily learning. I think they needed, one, structure in their schedule, but two, structure in the sense of they wanted to make sense of what was happening. Yea. Which I think that's what with online learning...there's the possibilities to hit people with a ton of information, and but then you...I think students are drawn to the comfort of, "I need to be able to sit down with somebody and talk face to face about what all this means."

Bennett observed that students crave places where they can make sense or meaning of what they are learning about themselves and the world through their education. As Kyle said:

I mean, I think skills are a part of a liberal arts education, but I don't think it exhausts a liberal arts education. I think knowledge, we need to know about the world, and our place in it. And if you have the skills, but you don't have the knowledge, you don't really have...what do you do with those skills?

Kyle proposed that the development of knowledge and skills is not "exhaustive" of liberal arts education. But he went further to describe how students can learn to apply knowledge and skills as they discern how to respond to their life vocations, or callings. Students need a community where there is sufficient commitment and trust to explore how to live a life of meaning and purpose with newly acquired knowledge and skill. According to some faculty participants, moving online would inhibit the sense of commitment, trust, and community that is necessary for effective vocational formation.



### **Summary of Essential Features Undermined**

So far in this chapter, I have identified the essential elements of liberal arts education as described by faculty. These are: a) a multi-disciplinary approach, b) liberal arts skills, c) embodied learning, d) faculty to student interaction, and e) student to student interaction. At the same time, I summarized their concerns about how online learning could undermine these elements of liberal arts education.

One essential element of liberal arts education described by faculty was a multi-disciplinary approach that teaches students to think from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Faculty believed that online learning could deliver some content well, but was not the best tool for equipping students with a multi-disciplinary perspective. In other words, online learning could help students to learn about philosophy, history, arts, and science. However, online learning would not do a good job of helping students to learn to think like a philosopher, historian, artist, or scientist.

A second essential element of liberal arts education described by faculty was the basic skills of skills of reading, thinking, interpersonal interaction, and communication. Faculty agreed with administrators that these are skills required for good citizenship. Similar to administrators, faculty participants expressed concern that these skills for good citizenship were more difficult to develop in online settings. As with the administrator group, the faculty group also did not discuss how online learning might develop skills necessary for life and good citizenship in the Digital Age.

Thirdly, faculty said that embodied learning was an essential feature of liberal arts education. Faculty said that wholistic learning was at its core a physical experience. Although administrators also said that face to face interaction was essential, they did not use the same

embodiment terminology as faculty. Faculty believed that online learning is “essentially a disembodied experience” that is not truly wholistic. Disembodied learning results in less memorable and more abstract learning that does not enable the adequate amount of trust to develop between students for good critical questioning together.

A fourth essential element of liberal arts education described by faculty was their interaction with students. At its best, this kind of interaction is energetic, spontaneous, and helps to motivate students. Good faculty rely on physical cues to respond to their class and to connect with their students. Face to face interaction in class sets the foundation for relationships beyond the class to flourish. However, according to faculty participants, online environments create barriers between faculty and students that inhibits people from responding to important social cues in class. Additionally, being physically absent from one another makes it more difficult for informal relationships between faculty and students to develop.

Finally, a fifth essential element of liberal arts education identified by faculty was student to student interaction. Every stakeholder group agreed on this. However, faculty participants were able to most articulately name why these interactions are important to liberal arts education. Face to face interaction between students fosters a sense of commitment and trust that establishes strong community in the classroom. Strong community exerts positive social pressure and opens the door for collective meaning making among students. In their interviews, student participants said that this meaning making, or process of vocational discernment, was an essential aspect of their experience.

In many different ways, faculty participants said that online learning was a disembodied experience, which undermines the ability to pursue liberal arts outcomes in the classroom. There was consensus among the faculty participants that an entirely online liberal arts degree would

undermine liberal arts education. This consensus was shared by all stakeholder groups, and was the most clear and consistent finding of this study. For faculty, this belief was rooted in the kinds of concerns already expressed in this chapter about embodied learning. But Bennett identified another dynamic that he believed was influencing faculty perceptions of online learning. He said that basic human inertia underlies faculty resistance to online learning. He said:

[Developing an online course] does require imagination and you know I find in [face to face] teaching I change up my courses a lot. And even in doing that in terms of thinking of new assignments and new readings, that's a lot of work. So to then do that and figure out, ok how am I going to have that fit in with this, on screen. It's something that, and I think that part of the reluctance of professors... is there is some serious, serious, serious inertia among academics, to continue doing the same lesson semester after semester. And part of it is, it's just so much dang work to prep a new course. And people are really reluctant, and I would say people are scared to do new things. And so when something new gets introduced, there's just a whole lot of grumbling. And so to make a course available online is really a leap of imagination for people. It's a big enough struggle to figure out how am I going to make a meaningful experience for 30 kids in a room with a white board, and maybe a PowerPoint. How am I going to get that to work? Now you want me to figure out how I'm going to do this? So it is something, and you know Middleton is going in the right direction in having somebody who's job it is to investigate how do we do this well, and then to work with faculty to help in that.

In an offhanded comment, Kyle conceded that perhaps some of his concern regarding online instruction was a partly a result of his lack of imagination. It is possible that this lack of imagination was also present in the administrators who had never experienced online learning

themselves. Still, many faculty participants were willing to imagine out loud in their interviews what online learning could look like if it were to be a part of liberal arts education. At this point, several faculty differed from administrators in that they could imagine ways to use online components to enhance or improve liberal arts education. Other faculty pointed to examples of strong liberal arts learning that has occurred in their own online teaching experience. Again, this is where faculty differed from administrators. Not surprisingly, those with direct experience teaching online tended to have a more clear idea of what might or might not work online.

Here is the pivot point in the chapter. In the remaining space of this chapter, I lay out the various ways that faculty imagined or had witnessed online learning support or enhance certain aspects of liberal arts education. These sections show that despite significant reservations, many faculty were not foreclosed to the idea that online learning could enhance liberal arts education.

### **Online Liberal Arts Education**

In reconciling online learning with liberal arts education, faculty first pointed out that the delivery format of a course is only one factor among a many others that determine the effectiveness of a course. Student and faculty variables play significant roles in shaping the quality of a liberal arts experience in a course. Simply put, the delivery format of a course does not necessarily determine if the course will be effective. Second, faculty participants were quick to say that digital tools and the Internet could enhance instruction in face to face courses. Third, faculty were optimistic about combining face to face and online experiences to shape hybrid learning. Some went as far as to say that hybrid delivery could surpass the quality of purely face to face courses.

## **Student and Faculty Variables**

Both the faculty who had taught online and those who had not taught online expressed concern over the negative consequences of disembodied learning. Yet, faculty who had taught online were able to make direct observations about what kinds of students tended to be successful in their online courses. In naming student characteristics, faculty acknowledged that the delivery method of a course is one of many important variables related to the success of liberal arts education.

Despite Jinsol's strong reservations about online learning, he pointed to the importance of the individual student's engagement with material in terms of the quality of the learning experience. In this way, Jinsol thought the mindset of the students enrolling in online courses would determine the effectiveness of the course, rather than the delivery format. Jinsol observed:

What I've found in terms of online, and again this is all anecdotal, I don't have any data.

But the motivations that students have for taking these courses, I have generally found to be, as quickly, as efficiently, and perhaps as cheaply as possible, fulfill a given curricular requirement. And so if their motivation for taking an online course is already rooted in speed, cost, and disengagement in some ways, then I think it's already a lost cause.

In this vein, several faculty participants lamented that the problem of vocationalization of education and commodification of knowledge had already been undermining liberal arts education. Still, faculty who had taught online were willing to say that online learning can work for some students. Carol suggested:

I would say that online learning by and large it works very well for the motivated and talented students. But honestly those students would learn if you left them on a rock. I mean they learn in any circumstance. Right? They have the drive. They have the

motivation. They have the ability, self-discipline to get the work done. I don't think online learning works as well for the less motivated or the weaker students.

Donald shared Carol's observation that student motivation and self-discipline have a heightened role in determining success in online learning. Donald noted:

In my experience, online learning goes in one of two ways. Either I have students enroll who are very self-motivated and self-disciplined, and I sort of just help them, or tutor them, or enable them, guide them as they go through the course, more as a corrective, or an augmentation of what they are doing...and those are really the best ones....or on the other extreme, there are students who have signed up for my online courses who believe that the course is going to be somehow easier than if they were in a traditional classroom setting, and so they flounder. And eventually they disappear from the course. And there doesn't seem to be an in-between. So in classes that I teach on campus, there's a fairly broad distribution of abilities and effort among the students. It's a bell shaped curve. But that's not the case in online learning. They are either truly motivated and do very well, and I pretty much just prod and poke them in certain ways, or enrich what they're doing, but they really teach themselves...and those students do outstanding work. And for them, online learning is successful. It's not the same as personal interaction in 'viva voce.' But it is a close second. But then at the other end of the spectrum are those who think "well it's an online course, of course it will be easier, I'll do it at my own pace and so forth." they tend to fail. There's not much in-between.

Because of this consistent experience of observing which students tend to be successful online, Donald wondered out loud about whether there was a good way to offer a qualifying exam to

students who were interested in online classes, as a way to ensure that students who enroll in online classes could handle the independent work. As he observed:

I think for the most part when a course did not go well, it wasn't so much that they were unable to do the work, but there was not enough self-discipline, they couldn't follow instructions, they had a wrong set of expectations even though the expectations were all laid out in advance.

Kyle described the same phenomenon related to self-discipline, motivation, and student success. While very disciplined students did well, others floundered. Kyle explained:

So my experience has been, there's been two kinds of students who take online courses at Middleton. Or take my course. So we can take the students to take my course, rather than generalize. Engineers. Nursing majors, and other majors professional, majors whose majors are very tight. They don't have a lot of fat and a lot of room in their schedule. Those students tend to do well. They're disciplined, they know what they're doing and don't generally have struggles. Now, they don't constitute the largest percentage of people who take the course. Then there are your average non-professional degree seeking student, who I think believe falsely that here's an easy way to get it out of the way. And undisciplined. Not good time managers.

The self-discipline of a student is important in any learning environment. Still, the online teaching experiences of faculty in this study suggest that self-discipline may have a more pronounced impact on student success in online environments. Similarly, student motivation is important in any setting. However, faculty raise concerns that many students who enroll in online courses may be less motivated to enroll purely for the sake of learning.

Student personality type was another important factor identified by faculty. Faculty said that online formats could allow introverts to thrive in ways that face to face settings would not. Several faculty participants said that one benefit to online learning is that it allows students more time for people to construct their written contributions to a class discussion. Carol said it most articulately when she explained:

I think online learning is actually quite helpful for the shy or the diffident. Because it's a different atmosphere than an in-class situation where some of our students are stressed by having to speak in front of others, having to put their ideas forward when other people are listening, and they find online learning actually much more comfortable because in a sense they're just talking to me. And that, for them is more reassuring. And they can express themselves more fluently. They have more time to think before they put something down. This actually works quite well. It does not work for the unmotivated or the less motivated who seem to need the classroom dynamic and the presence of the professor in front of them to actually get their work done.

Education professor, Mary observed that:

I've noticed that in my class, there are students who are more quiet in face to face conversations and they need some time to reflect. And on a discussion board, their voices are heard. And other students appreciate those voices. So there's that. If one of the virtues [of liberal arts education] is taking time to think and ponder, I think that online education can offer that. It doesn't have to be a quick response. But those time lags can be okay.

Sarah said:

I went to the University of Washington in the 90's, so I was in the first cohort that taught freshman composition with computers. So we used both synchronous and asynchronous



kinds of technology. We tried chat rooms. We tried bulletin board kinds of things. We tried to think about technology in that way in the classroom. Both inside and outside the classroom. So we could facilitate other kinds of discussion that might not happen in class. There were several semesters we used anonymous. They got to have a username that was different, shielded from what they did in the classroom, which was kind of interesting. I mean this was early enough on that the trolling, flame wars, I mean some of that happened, but because I knew who they were, you know, cause there was some safety. But it was interesting in terms of the way in which it allowed some students who had one persona in class to contribute to the discussion differently in the online dialogue.

Administrators and students concurred that online learning creates space for introverted students to think and contribute through asynchronous online methods. However, students also expressed that face to face discussion is essential, and that online discussion should not replace face to face discussion entirely.

According to the faculty participants in this study, introverted, motivated, and self-disciplined students are well suited for online learning. However, several faculty participants put the responsibility of whether or not an online course would be good on the faculty teaching the course. Even though faculty expressed significant concerns about online learning, many made explicit comments that resisted a simple reductive dichotomy that online learning is bad and face to face learning is good. For example, Charles said, "I think a really good online class is better than a bad [face to face] class any day of the week. Not like online automatically makes something bad, automatically cheapens it. I mean there are brilliant professors who can do wonderful things with media that you can't do in the class." In the words of Bennett:

I used to sit in and observe people's teaching and think, "I'm bored." And I would give my suggestions in terms of here's how to change things to make it more engaging. So I know that there are really boring classes. Online classes aren't going to cure that. There are going to be really boring online classes (laughs). So to think that this is going to be the silver bullet that kind of cures all education problems is...yea...it's not going to. So just as a good classroom class requires a whole lot of creativity on the part of the teacher, and it requires the students to commit to learning. It's the same phenomenon of course. Jodi's comments are an example where she acknowledged that the success of a class does not depend on the delivery format entirely, but also relies on effective teaching:

I think that hybrid learning and the online portion can be very loosey goosey and not directed and you might get something out of it. But the prompts themselves have to be very well thought out. And there's a lot of work that the instructor needs to do at the front end in order to get that kind of interaction happening to its fullest.

From these comments, faculty implied that the most important question is not whether or not to put some elements of instruction online. Instead, the important question is how to teach well online. Together, faculty skill and student characteristics determine the quality of a course. Student variables such as introversion, mindset, motivation, and self-discipline are particularly salient factors that influence whether online learning formats could be compatible with liberal arts education.

### **Internet as Supplemental Tool**

Despite concerns about online learning as a disembodied experience that can undermine liberal arts education, most of the faculty participants offered ways in which the use of digital tools could support or even improve liberal arts education. Faculty participants cited several

examples where the use of digital tools and the Internet could supplement a traditional, face to face class. For example, when asked if online learning could improve liberal arts education, Kyle responded, “if we’re just thinking about technology and the Internet, and that kind of thing, then I employ that in my regular classes every semester. So there are definitely kind of benefits, as a supplement.” He also noted the value in online video, which is available to students on demand. Jinsol who was suspicious of any benefit of online learning conceded that:

I think online can at best serve a supplementary role to traditional courses. I mean we use online tools. And different professors use them in a variety of ways to various effects. And so there is a place for online delivery of content, but I think it’s got to be in conjunction with a real face to face course.

Sarah talked about using a learning management system to assign response papers that student would complete before each class:

I aggressively use the response paper. So you write 300 words for me before every class. But it’s mostly a way so that when you come to class, you aren’t put on the spot. Right? So I can say tell me about your response paper that you already wrote, and that I already read before you came to class. So I do think that there are ways in which technology really allows me to include the discussion and to help figure out where they are without embarrassing them by just calling them out. And then fill. Or they might be introverted and really need a little bit more time. I mean, depending on how people feel about learning styles

In Sarah’s example, the face to face discussions in her writing classes are still prominent. The learning management system serves to support the face to face discussion. Katrina also spoke about using online resources as teaching tools:

There will be times that I send [students] to do online modules instead of places. So I use for example, the IRIS modules. That's the Vanderbilt group who does educational modules.... IRIS modules allow for deep exploration where these are already established, great content delivery and exploration opportunities...And they've got these developed modules where a module starts out with a video and a question that a teacher has in the classroom. And it's based on a real life problem that someone had. And then there are phases in the module that you work through. And within that, you hit a point where it gives you information and resources, which is just as valuable as what I do, teaching it or sharing it,

Katrina offered two other examples of how the use of Internet resources, either in a face to face or online course, could add value to a course. She explained that the Internet can connect people to environments where they might not otherwise have access:

We can also go into settings that might be harder to get into. So if I want to go to rural special education settings and we've got people who are situated in a place where it's hard to get to rural special education settings. We now have the opportunity to use what's available on the web to visit those classrooms and see those classrooms and discuss them and explain them and look at professionals who have spent their time really focusing on rural or urban, or whatever it might be, go ahead and put the adjective in there. But now we can see different teaching placement and we can talk about that in terms of the content that we're covering in the course.

The Internet can also connect students to situations that might be rare, or dangerous to experience in a face to face setting:

So talking about for example, behavioral issues and looking at behavioral management.... You might be talking about behavior management and you actually need to visually see and experience what it might be like to experience this, a violent student... So now you have the opportunity to use the resource where someone has provided the training on that. So we may not physically have to go to a school or wait for this to happen, or have to provide a vignette... We actually have people who have developed entire modules related to that where we can actually see it and experience it. That's without having them all have to step into the same classroom as me, which is really helpful when I've got learners all over the United States and we're trying to figure out how do we actually see a safe way to experience this.

Katrina went on to say that the Internet can connect students to broader social networks, and that students can access people and materials on the Internet that can be brought back to the class setting to enhance the learning experience.

In speaking more explicitly about liberal arts education, education professor Mary pointed out that increasing social connections across cultural barriers could enhance the study of history. In her interview, she wondered:

I know that in our group when we studied online learning, we thought, 'wow what a great opportunity to have students from a university in Accra having the Middleton students in the same class. Which helps to bring in multiple aspects, but also helps to bring in constraints, then too. How do you cross cultural boundaries in the same classroom? But I think that's a piece of understanding, not just, 'here is my culture, and the way that we think about this point in history' when we're talking with someone else about that same

point in history. What do we gain from that? What perspective do we gain from that? I have to think about that more.

Finally, Katrina talked about how taking an online course and using digital tools could allow students to critically analyze and engage with digital technology, using liberal arts skills.

I think one of the other things that using technology allows, if it's done right, allows students in a liberal arts institution to do is think about why? So if we really believe that we need to question the ways in which we teach... then you have to be asking the questions about all you do. And when you introduce a tool, not only how are you using it to shape what you're teaching or your students are learning, but how is it shaping us? So if you have the opportunity to use technology and say, 'what were the constraints? What were the affordances?' And they can talk about that and they can talk about it as a tool, but then you can say, how did it change your practices in ways that you did not anticipate? We've now created a critical thinker who's able to think through a variety of different tools and mediums and I think it's so important that we ask those questions about digital technology. I don't think people are asking those questions enough. And an online course is an extremely exciting opportunity to have that discussion. And then say let's talk about the difference between what's happened with Voice Thread at the beginning and the end. How are your practices changing because of the use of Voice Thread? How did your posts change over time as you got comfortable with the technology? What happened do the way that you talk, or where you decided to present when you recorded yourself with the camera? Because these things happen. They aren't necessarily aware of them at first, but if you can draw attention to that, then what you're doing is deliberately talking about the technology itself... And then because I talk about

technology, at the very end [of the course], I'll connect it to, 'So when we provide a student with a disability with a technology, what may be changing for them?' Not only how they're using the tool, but it might shape them and their family practices and their habits and their beliefs. So now, we get to really identify with what it might mean to put any digital tool, or non-digital tool in the hands of a student with a disability who then relies on that tool to succeed academically.

From these examples we can see how faculty are already leveraging the Internet to support liberal arts education. However, the emphasis is on digital tools that enhance face to face instruction, rather than replace face to face instruction. Again, this was one area of consensus among the stakeholder groups. Another area of broad consensus among the three groups was that if parts of liberal arts education move online, then courses should be offered in hybrid formats.

### **Hybrid Learning**

Several faculty participants were enthusiastic about hybrid learning and how it could improve liberal arts education. For example, after expressing the ways in which she thought online learning could undermine class discussion, and the essential embodied interaction of liberal arts learning, Sarah said:

Teaching is about connection. It's why from time in memorium we've sat in little groups with our children and told them stories. That's what this is. Now we can tell them stories in other ways. We can tell them stories with TED talks and all that sort of thing, but if the student is not a consumer, which I do not believe they are, if they're a consumer, they can watch videos to their heart's content. But if they're not consumers, if they're participants, I think that we have to figure out ways to make the learning as active as possible. I'm not always convinced that watching a video is active learning. Right? Or even engaging in an

online type, type, type, type, type thing. I'm willing to say there's possibilities. Not willing to totally reject it. But I also think that why would we get rid of things that work for things that maybe only partly work. Why not put them both together? I mean I really am much more in favor of hybrid. Even if it's them coming for a little bit.

When asked to describe an online course that would most align with the ideal of a liberal arts education, Donald described his preferred format:

Right, well I think it would be a hybrid course. I think it would begin by enrolling the minimum...let's see the maximum number of students...the minimum number of students that would allow to be economically feasible. If that's 10, great. If that's 15, great. And then three quarters to seven eighths of the course would operate like kind of the British tutorial model. So I would assign large readings. Students would submit to me their reflections and there would be some back and forth. And all of this could be done through posting, could be facilitated by the instructor. And then the last quarter or last eighth of the course would involve a kind of summative face to face interaction in which we would build on all of the studying and interaction previously from the course. They would try to synthesize some of the ideas and the rich content in which they would analyze

Charles described a "flipped classroom" format that would be considered a hybrid course:

I think a lot of the other things that I see [online] being able to do, are what I see offline education being able to do, too. I'm going back here to the definition of online learning because a flipped classroom is online learning where instead of going in and lecturing, you now have whole video that basically accomplishes the information delivery. I don't think that the delivery of that information...if I record a little video of my lecture...that



doesn't necessarily improve a liberal arts education. But it might improve the liberal arts education in the offline classroom if we can do more of the competing perspectives on the subject matter. If I can clear classroom time for liberal arts conversation, by putting the lecture, the information delivery online. I mean that might be a partial answer to your question, but it's hard because, it's not really...the online learning piece of that...it's the liberal arts. It's that the online learning is enabling the liberal arts education offline.

Art professor Jodi said it even stronger:

My own research has told me and I believe this is true because I've actually experienced this, that the best learning occurs in a hybrid situation. And not second to only being in the classroom. No, hybrid as in both, is the best type of learning. Not only online and not only classroom. So for a long time I was convinced that hybrid might be equal to the classroom, but now there's actually statistics saying that hybrid is actually better than the classroom. So that's what I'm sort of ferretting out right now.

Jodi described her recent experience teaching a hybrid course for the first time:

We were on campus for a week. And then we finished online again at the end. I have to tell you that the online piece was not only thoroughly enjoyable, but it was really I think impactful in the sense that we asked people to respond to each other and respond in different ways and with certain deadlines and all this kind of stuff. But what it did was it allowed people to do some thinking while talking. Versus this classroom experience where sometimes people need a whole lot more time to think and end up not saying anything. And other people are gab flies or whatever and they talk all the time. So (laughs)! I thought that was revelatory to me. It allowed everybody to speak, and it allowed everybody to speak at their own pace and at their own time in response to very

specific prompts that were intended to be learning... In other words, I think that hybrid learning and the online portion can be very loosey goosey and not directed and you might get something out of it. But the prompts themselves have to be very well thought out. And there's a lot of work that the instructor needs to do at the front end in order to get that kind of interaction happening to its fullest. But I never would have dropped the on campus portion, because then suddenly you know you're face to face, which is really good. Having done that online, and coming and actually meeting and interacted that way. But then there were a lot of things obviously that were necessary as a part of the course that you can't do online. So for example, the course was a lot to do with sacred space. So at one point in time we had a foot washing experience. Well, pretty darn hard to do that online, right? And yet, that could not have been missed. That was a very significant piece that again got talked about online later, but wasn't going to be possible online. We had a lovely experience with going to the on campus nature center and looking at some of the sustainability issues there. Not able to do online. We spent time here in the rain garden for example. Again, not able to do online. So to my mind, that was a perfect argument, me experiencing that, for the hybrid, because none of that could have happened just online or just in the class. So if I think about the liberal arts experience, it seems to me then that online fits in, hybrid online, fits in very naturally. Because you're doing the multiple aspects of being human, and doing it in a way that can't be done in other ways. Jodi went on to describe hybrid learning in terms of "front porch learning" and asynchronous online reflection from a distance.

I'm doing this independent course. And I decided to do it in a hybrid way as well. And there are things, I mean so far, we've done the porch thing. You know, the front porch,

and sitting together, and you're having dialogue together, that I think is really important because it's sensory and it's responsive to signals that a body is giving. If you know what I mean. So the conversation in that community is very very important. But, it's also important to have these ideas gel, and these things that we take out of the conversation to mull about it. And then we are at a distance. We can't sit on the front porch forever, day after day after day. So then this online piece becomes really critical because that's where we're doing our thinking and our responding. And maybe even our sorting. You know, like, okay, I've been thinking about this, but never thought about it that way. I wonder what....and that kind of stuff. So I know that you can do that through journaling, you could. But I think online's immediacy is important. And I can't tell you that I've worked through that completely. I would have to experience this more. But the fact that I am thinking through this stuff and journaling, but online, and that there can be a response even at the same time to that, or conversely, within a certain framework of time, I think is important. Whereas journaling is often seen as private I think in some respects. But that if it's journaling for a class, you're still in a way dealing with this long time factor, because your journal is done this week, and you might be handing it in 5 weeks later. So the immediacy is lost that you would get through online. And I'm actually liking that quite a bit, that immediacy.

### **Examples of Online Liberal Arts**

Although faculty participants believed that an entirely online liberal arts degree would be missing essential elements, some faculty were able to imagine and describe how online assignments or courses could facilitate the kinds of knowledge and skills associated with a traditional liberal arts education. This section presents faculty descriptions of three examples.

**Antigone, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, and Critical Reflection.** One excellent example is how Carol uses online formats to improve student reflection. When asked whether online learning could improve liberal arts education, Carol answered tentatively and hesitantly at first:

I would say that the online class can improve the reflection piece. The ability to ask those deep questions. So here's an assignment that I give them and I think that it works out really quite well in an online setting. My students read an abstract from Sophocles' play Antigone. If you know anything about Antigone, one of the plot lines is to do with the fact of, what do you do with someone who is a traitor to their community? Antigone's brother has betrayed his home city, has attacked it with an army and died. The King who succeeds him says this guy's not going to be buried. He was a traitor to our own city. Antigone is the sister of the dead guy, and she tries to bury him and goes against the community law. So we've got a man whose a traitor to his own city, and what should be done with his body...I have the students reflect on this and then I ask them to reflect on the case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the older brother of the two people accused of being the Boston Bombers...Tamerlan is the brother who died. He died in a police shootout...There was a big controversy in Boston when he died... What should be done with his body? He's a traitor. He has betrayed his country. He was living in the US. He did this terrible thing. What should be done with his body? It was a whole thing. People were like hanging out placards in Boston saying "Dump this man in the garbage heap. Throw him into the sea for the fishes." I had my students work on it and think, ok, Antigone, Sophocles, ancient world. Tamerlan Tsarnaev, United States, 2013. Compare, contrast, try and understand. Does your opinion of what happened in Antigone change now that you've learned about Tamerlan Tsarnaev? You know, what do you think is

going on here? Why are people so hostile? Is it the feel that these guys have cheated punishment by dying too soon? Right? They never went on trial for their crimes? Right? Is that what's happened? Can you explain why Tamerlan Tsarnaev or Polynices, why there is so much stress over them being buried when people who've killed even more folk, their burials happen without question? Right? The shooter at the school, Sandyhook school. He was buried. Nobody raised a peep about it. Okay. Why? Was it foreignness? Is it, he's a Muslim? Is it, what's going on here? Right? And these are the kinds of deep questions you have. I have my students write a whole paper on. And then I think there's enough time and space for them to start thinking about these things. And these are difficult questions. These are hard questions. And actually sometimes I think online perhaps allows them to think about these things more deeply than if I said, ok we're going to have a class discussion today. Let's all think about Tamerlan Tsarnaev... But I think that their ability to think themselves into the situation is perhaps a bit deeper in the online class when they can pace themselves perhaps and take the time to reflect more deeply about this. I've had some very good papers on this.

In the example of the Tsarnaev assignment, it isn't necessarily the online learning environment itself that is improving student learning. Instead, the digital technology allows students to be in the absence of people, which allows students the space to think deeply and write thoughtful reflections.

**Placed-Based Brothers Karamazov.** When asked to imagine designing a course that would most closely align with the essential features and core purposes of liberal arts education, Charles offered an example of a course that courses could maximize the affordances of online learning environments. In speaking, Charles seemed to be working his idea out loud as he spoke:

I think that it would have to capitalize on what I was talking about earlier with the physical setting of the student. So it would have to involve subject matter where that difference of setting would make a difference. For some courses that would be more true than for others. It would be a course where students would need a lot of information from me. That's what the Internet does really well. I'm thinking of my Russian literature course where there's a lot of contextual information. To read the Brothers Karamazov, I tell students I put it on the syllabus because it's big and long and a lot of people want to have read it. And you're not going to do it outside of class cause it's just too hard (laughs). It really helps to have someone saying, here's what's going on. And the Internet is a good way to say, "here's what's going on. Here's the context. Here's where he's coming from." So that would be a very, very suitable, I think the Brothers Karamazov is very suitable because it requires a lot of information from me. And an online medium is good for delivering that information. At the same time, the Brothers Karamazov is a very open ended novel. Even on the same ideas. It doesn't develop a thesis. It develops four or five different thesis and asks you to sort them out. So it would be very possible for me to have students online say, "given your setting, in Peru...in Maine...how do you see this happening?" So that would be a way of expanding the multiplicity of the novel, and including the multiplicity of places...So I would want content where I had to produce a lot of information, but yet where the settings of students would also be important.

**Riding a Bus in Hungary: Leveraging Community Beyond Campus.** In her interview, Mary referred to a question that is often asked about online learning, which is "How do we help the students build a community?" Mary observed, "Well, they also have a community in which they live. And how can we build on those more, so that their assignments get them talking with

their community?” In this way, the essential embodied aspect of liberal arts education could occur beyond the boundaries of the traditional campus location. Bennett offered an example of what this could look like:

I think that something that's key with liberal arts education is reflection. And I think back to when I directed the off campus program in Hungary. And something I had students do, and this is something I learned from my wife who used to teach writing, she would have students just go on campus and observe and write down notes... I did this with students in Hungary. You are going to ride the entire length of a bus route. Just to observe who comes on and who gets off. And I think something you could do with online stuff is to make that more creative. To have students take pictures, or videos, and to bring in that and then to comment on or analyze what they're seeing. And then to be able to share that online. To make it more of...yea...this I think would be the way to do it, to make it more like Facebook, in the sense of you put up a post, you put up a picture and your friends all comment on it...being able to have, whether people type in comments, some kind of interaction. Yea, I think online course would offer the option of having students interact together with their work more. Whereas now, when students turn in papers, [one of my colleagues] this line, that papers are like a dirty little secret between a student and a professor. Because I just give it you, and you only see what I write, as opposed to having students look at their own work. Students get nervous when critiquing each other's work. Nobody wants to say oh you need to put your commas in here. But to have them comment on each other's work, I think that is something that could be done in an online course better than, maybe not better than, yea, maybe even better than you could in a regular course.

## **Summary of Online Liberal Arts Education**

In conclusion, faculty participants listed several ways that online learning could support or improve liberal arts education. First, student and faculty factors play major roles in determining the quality of individual courses. Although many students struggle online, those with high levels of motivation and self-discipline can thrive. Second, faculty already employ digital tools in their courses. Digital tools can employ video, webpages, modules, deliver content, and can connect students to environments and social networks otherwise out of reach. Digital tools also present instructors and students to critically engage the digital tools themselves. Third, faculty were enthusiastic about hybrid formats because these formats allow instructors to combine elements of solitude with community reflection, discussion, and relationships. Instructors can tweak the speed of interaction as well. Asynchronous discussion can slow the interaction when necessary. In person interaction can offer the immediacy of facial expression and dialogue. Furthermore, hybrid courses allow instructors to maximize the physicality of face to face environments while at the same time maximizing the space for personal reflection that online settings provide. Hybrid environments allow instructors to either speed up or slow down the pace of interaction between students. In doing this, faculty are able to alter the speed of interaction in class. In some cases, the immediacy of a discussion with classmates while sharing a meal on someone's front porch is necessary. In other cases, online learning offers the necessary solitude and controlled interaction that encourages deep learning and reflection. In other words, hybrid formats have the most potential when they combine solitude with community learning that takes advantage of the physical space where students gather for learning. In this way, hybrid environments do not entirely abandon the embodied learning experience of face to face interaction.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **STUDENTS**

Since 2003, Allen and Seaman (2015) have worked with the Babson Research Group to become the primary chronicler of national enrollment and attitudes toward online learning. Over the years, this research has focused on the perceptions of chief academic officers, technology staff, and faculty in higher education. Consequently, student perspectives have been largely ignored. Therefore, by interviewing students, my research adds voices to the online learning conversation that have been missing at the national level.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, administrators in this study were limited by their lack of direct experience learning or teaching in online settings. Because online learning is so new, it is reasonable to assume that this might be true for many administrators across the country who are late in their careers. Similar to the Provost at Middleton, many chief academic officers are likely being asked to make strategic decisions about online learning without direct experience to inform their perspective. As shown in the Babson reports (Allen & Seamn, 2015), an increasing number of chief academic officers report that online learning is “strategic” to their institution’s future.

Regardless, interviews with administrators, faculty, and students in this study add depth to the national survey data in the literature. These interviews also set the stage for the current chapter, which presents findings from student interviews. In a way, student interviews serve as a check against administrator and faculty perceptions of the liberal arts education experience at Middleton. Student interviews help us to see if the experiences of students match up against how administrators and faculty describe liberal arts education. If faculty and administrators set up an idealized version of liberal arts education, the student data should reveal whether these ideals are

received and experienced by students attending Middleton. As we will see in this chapter, many student comments affirm the essential elements and core purposes of liberal arts education as set forth by administrators and faculty. Moreover, students expressed their preference for face to face learning over online learning.

Nationally, online enrollments have grown sharply in recent decades (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Conventional wisdom would say that students are entering higher education as digital natives who are accustomed to using digital technology in the classroom and have the expectation that digital tools and online learning should be a part of their education. Without hearing directly from students, one could conclude that the rise in online learning confirms this expectation in students. However, as the faculty pointed out in this study, paying attention to student motivations for taking online courses is important. Interviews with the student participants in this study indicate that student perceptions of the value of online learning are mixed. Although students acknowledged a place for online learning, they did not believe it was a replacement for on campus and face to face learning.

In order to probe student understandings of the compatibility between liberal arts education and online learning, I asked each student participant directly about their understanding of the essential nature and core purpose of a liberal arts education. In general, student responses to these direct questions seemed less rehearsed and elaborate than the responses of faculty and administrators to the same questions. Students relied on their personal experience of liberal arts education to make their comments, which was different from how faculty and administrators approached the topic. Faculty and administrators drew from personal experience, but also relied heavily on abstract ideas and understandings of what liberal arts education should be. Because of this difference, I also tried to uncover student beliefs about the essential nature and core purpose

of liberal arts education more indirectly from students. To do this, I asked students to describe experiences at Middleton that had been the most challenging or shaping for them. This prompted students to speak more freely because they were describing their experiences and not focusing on trying to define terms. This elicited conversation about which aspects of their education were most important to them, rather than to feel pressured to offer a clear and “correct” definition of liberal arts education. Responses to these questions served as a springboard to compare specific elements of their experience of liberal arts education to online learning environments.

As students shared their experiences at Middleton and their opinions of online learning, three main themes became evident. The following three themes constitute how student participants described the essential nature and core purpose of liberal arts education: a) student formation, b) faculty to student interaction, and c) student to student interaction. The first theme, student formation, encapsulates how students described the core purpose of liberal arts education. This is not in tension with administrator and faculty accounts of the purpose of liberal arts education. However, students had much more succinct and simple understandings of liberal arts education than the faculty and administrators. The second two themes can be condensed into one word: interaction. Students said that their interactions with faculty were essential to their experiences at Middleton. Similarly, students said that their interactions with other students were essential. These two forms of interaction are the ingredients that lead to meaningful student formation. Students did not think this interaction could be done entirely online without undermining the educational experience. Interactive learning was a central theme addressed by all stakeholder groups in this study. Though interaction can be moved online, according to the stakeholders in this study, technology mediated interaction alters the quality of the interaction in significant ways. As the current chapter will show, students concur with administrators and faculty in

believing that interaction is essential, and that this interaction cannot be entirely moved to online environments without undermining student learning.

At the same time that students said they preferred face to face learning, they also said their experiences online were positive. Therefore, students were willing to allow online learning to play a role in liberal arts education, despite its status as “second best.” This chapter describes student understandings of the compatibility of liberal arts education to online learning by elaborating on the above three themes. This chapter also compares the data from student interviews against data from faculty and administrator interviews.

### **Student Formation**

Data from student interviews demonstrated that students were interested in gaining more from their education than content knowledge or certification. All stakeholder groups emphasized this basic value. In student interviews, this value became evident as students spoke about growing spiritually, developing their worldview, and exploring their identity and calling. These desires are part of an overarching commitment to student formation.

Student formation is a guiding principal at Middleton, and is similar to but distinct from the way wholistic student development is often understood in the scholarly student affairs and higher education literature. George Kuh’s (1996) frequently cited work about “seamless learning environments” is representative of conventional wisdom in student affairs. Kuh advocates for an integration of classroom learning with student development that occurs outside the classroom. Since the 1960’s there has been a proliferation of student development theories, each aimed at explaining how certain aspects of human development take shape in college students. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn’s (2010) textbook organizes these theories into psychosocial, cognitive, ecological, and social categories. At Middleton, the concept of student formation

addresses these categories, but also has a distinct spiritual dimension that coheres human development across these various categories. As Lowe and Lowe (2010) propose, whole person human development, or human formation, is an integrated process that includes intellectual, social, moral, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Students in this study were looking for this kind of formation, and were skeptical about how this could happen online.

The following sections of this chapter describe the expectations and experiences of students regarding their formation during their time at Middleton. Comments about formation revolve around a) expectations and motivation for spiritual formation, b) curricular learning and c) co-curricular formation.

### **Motivation and Expectations for Faith Formation**

At different points in their interviews, students spoke with varying level of detail about a religious and spiritual dimension to their education. For Christi, a senior Biology major, growing spiritually was one of the main motivations for attending Middleton. Madeline, a senior who was majoring in International Development Studies and minoring in French, also chose to attend Middleton based on its Christian education:

So I chose Middleton when I was a Freshman in high school actually. I knew that I wanted to come here for a long time. And the basis of that really was the Christian education. I came from a large public high school in Ann Arbor and so I always felt like those that I was with in the classroom, were kind of trying to uproot my faith, and challenge it. In some ways that was really helpful, because I feel like I came into college with a pretty good idea of what I believed and how to articulate that. But I wanted to be with professors that actually believed some of the same things that I did fundamentally.

Jessica, a Music and Education major, said one reason she enrolled in a summer online history course at Middleton was for the Christian perspective and for the “interpersonal communication.” She did not want to take a history class at a community college where the emphasis would be “here’s your book knowledge, here’s your credits, see you later.” In comments such as these, students expressed their desires to gain something more than simply an exchange of money for content knowledge and credits. Even when discussing career plans, students described their hopes of finding meaning and purpose, in addition to paid employment.

Student motivation is an important factor to consider when examining the compatibility of online learning and liberal arts education. Faculty in this study were concerned that students who enroll in online courses tend to be motivated by ease, convenience, and efficiency. As the faculty experiences described in Chapter 5 revealed, not all students do well online environments. Faculty observed that many students had a hard time keeping up with coursework, despite the high faculty availability and engagement in online courses at Middleton. Not surprisingly, it was the self-disciplined and motivated students who were the ones who did well online. If faculty perceptions are accurate, and students often enroll in online courses for the sake of convenience, ease, and cost, then shifts toward online learning could threaten liberal arts education.

However, it is clear to see from student comments that the students in this study did not view their education as simply a marketable good that could be purchased. Instead, they were looking for a transformative experience. They appeared genuinely interested in learning and personal formation, and they wanted to do this in physical community with other students and faculty. This kind of motivation will influence the outcomes of an educational experience, regardless of whether it is online. Further research could compare whether student motivation and self-discipline have a stronger influence on student outcomes in online or face to face settings.

## **Curricular Learning and Formation**

As we saw from Chapters Four and Five, faculty and administrators had very specific expectations for a liberal arts curriculum. In different ways, each group iterated the roles that specific disciplines should play in helping students to gain disciplinary knowledge and skill. Faculty and administrators also listed the need to develop values and skills in students that would enable students to be good citizens in a democracy. Specifically, administrators and faculty said that good citizens should be able to read, write, and think critically. Good citizens should also have the ability to empathize with others, and contribute to society by pursuing their vocational callings. These various elements appeared in student comments; however students tended to have much more simple definitions of liberal arts education.

Student definitions of liberal arts education did not contradict the faculty and administrator groups, but were less elaborate. For example, when asked to define liberal arts education, Alena said, “I just understand it as usually a smaller college that would require that you take classes outside of the program that you’re studying.” Although Alena’s answer was very simple, her comments throughout her interview, such as the above comment about her honors cluster course, revealed her preference for specific elements of liberal arts education described by faculty and administrators in more detail. In other words, Alena described her preference for elements such as such as Socratic pedagogy, and interdisciplinary learning without explicitly naming them. For example, when asked what her favorite class was, Alena responded by saying:

Well, my freshman year, that honors cluster of Art History and History is probably my favorite. There was fifteen of us, fifteen or sixteen, and we had four two hour classes with the same people and then both those classes are four credits, so a lot of time. And we did field trip kind of things. We went to Chicago, and went to visit Chicago’s Near East Museum. And

a really cool one. Stuff like that. It was just a fun class. Lots of discussions. All of my small classes are my favorites. I feel like there's more discussion.

Several students used the term “well-rounded” when defining liberal arts education. Similar to Alena, they referred to being required to take courses from a range of different disciplines. Although students used different rhetoric that faculty and administrators to talk about the purpose of liberal arts education curriculum, there was evidence that students saw the purpose of liberal arts courses and “core” curriculum requirements went beyond just learning content knowledge from these disciplines.

Nathan, a religion, Greek, and philosophy major, offered a more detailed definition of liberal arts education by explaining that it includes the study of varied disciplines, as well as their history of thought. His comments about wholistic learning reveal his conscious understanding that liberal arts education is more than gaining knowledge from several different areas. He said:

I think you should set a high bar, cause in my experience, if I were to just had taken a theology class, I would have taken some things away from that class that would have been helpful, some I would have forgotten within a few months. And then it would have sort of been just a class that I would have had to take. You know? To fulfill something with. But the cool thing about liberal arts is that when it's done thoroughly, and you have to take a couple of classes, you start to get changed in really personal and holistic ways that you didn't really anticipate...And that's really going to inform your worldview. You know? So I think the more thorough you are, the less it becomes just a fulfillment, and the more it subtly informs your worldview, actually change a person more.

Nathan referred to well-rounded education in his definition of liberal arts education, but emphasized how a “wholistic” education develops an informed worldview in students. Although



Nathan lists specific disciplines when defining a liberal arts education early in his interview, the bulk of his comments throughout my conversation with him focused on the idea of formation:

But for me, it's been hugely helpful to feel like I'm getting a really well-rounded education. And I guess in some ways, the programs that I'm studying are the programs that other people wouldn't want to, but have to at Middleton. But I feel like it molds students really wholistically, and I feel as much as I've grown as a student, intellectually during my time here, I feel like I've grown much more as a person. I feel like I've learned just how to think about things. They throw the word worldview around a lot, but it's really true. I feel like I have a much more robust type of worldview and it's given me just a better system for going about thinking about the world, and ideas in general. And I feel like I'm much more well-rounded in my Christian faith. Not that they take any spirituality out of it, but they add a lot of intellectual backing and grounding to it.

In this statement, Nathan showed that his academic training at Middleton had spilled into his spiritual and personal life in ways that altered how he fundamentally looked at the world. In the above statement, Nathan also provides evidence that he had developed the kind of critical thinking skill that the faculty and administrator groups in this study had identified as essential to a liberal arts education.

Nathan also made some remarks that allude to the kind of multi-disciplinary thinking that faculty in this study said were essential to a liberal arts education. Nathan did this as he reported how he began to learn about first and second order wisdom in an introduction to philosophy course:

You open up with one of Plato's dialogues. You have to right? It's Intro to Philosophy...But what you end up having to talk about then, in those Socratic dialogues

is 1<sup>st</sup> versus 2<sup>nd</sup> order wisdom. This is something we learn the first few weeks of college then, if you take philosophy so early, and that is that the first order of wisdom is realizing that you really know nothing. And so the Socratic dialogue, you circle around the definition of a certain word, like virtue, and you realize you can't actually define it. And then you realize I can't really know anything. And only once you realize you are totally finite, fallen, can't know anything for sure, only then can you really start to build certain amounts of true wisdom. And that is second order wisdom, right? Okay, we can get a lecture on that in our 153 class, but you know I think I had the head knowledge of what that meant, but I didn't really totally understand what it meant to have 1<sup>st</sup> order wisdom of realizing you don't really know anything, until I was really a couple years into college, and I had taken a few 100, 200 level classes, and gotten properly steeped in the history of Christian thought, the history of secular thought as well, and realized that wow, thinkers have gone back and forth on all these fundamental questions of the universe, and it's supplemented by all this math and science that all takes a more hard look at the universe, and it's totally right and proper that we do that, and even with that supplementing, there's these big questions that we just can't know. And not only once we understand ourselves in that context, can we actually properly humble ourselves to have those fruitful conversations about those things.

To summarize Nathan's prolonged discussion of his academic formation, Nathan began by explaining how his worldview and his spiritual perspectives were shaped by the liberal arts curriculum, and how this prompted him to "grow as a person." He continued by reflecting on how his philosophical training had influenced how he engaged with other disciplines. Finally, he ended by explaining that developing wisdom is a process that engenders intellectual humility.

While Nathan emphasized intellectual and character formation, Jessica emphasized the importance of learning to “live things out.” Ideas and knowledge have implications for day to day living. In this way, liberal arts education helps students to think about how to live. Jessica said:

It’s like when you look at the mission statement, and you want to act justly, live wholeheartedly and all that, I think you’re able to do that when you’re equipped from all different perspectives... I feel it is easier for you to live things out when you know them or are able to evaluate them from different perspectives, and weight them, and decide what’s valuable.

Jessica gave an example of how the different perspectives of the liberal arts core shaped her understanding of her major. She also said that core courses have “shaped [her] as a human being.” When asked to explain what she meant by this, she said:

So I’ve experienced [being shaped as a human being] with my core classes, and have grown a lot and been able to even look at my music, my specific area of study, from all these different perspectives....If you look at music, and music theory that has a lot of math in it. There’s set theory, and all these patterns and formulas and stuff like that, and then you look at sound waves, and that’s science, so that’s really cool how you can connect on those things...and talk with other people. And then you look at the arts, and aesthetic feel, and how music and poetry complement each other, and you get the English side of things, or you look at music from different ages, and that’s philosophy and people’s ideas. In a historical context, you can study the music, cause music really reflects where people are at, or like ballads tell the stories of famous heroes, or different war conquests, you know, there’s all connections throughout everything. So that’s just a

couple connections, but things that come to mind and that's really, there is a lot more depth to my learning and my music because of all those classes that I took.

Jessica's examples of the overlap of disciplines, and how they inform her music, rolled quickly off her tongue without the need for much searching or contemplation. From these student comments, we can see that students did not emphasize the importance of developing a wide range of knowledge when talking about liberal arts education. Instead, they used words like wisdom, worldview, humility, "living things out," and "being shaped as a human" to describe how their academic study had formed them.

In Nathan and Jessica's comments, the emphasis is on how one's learning would influence their interaction with others. It is possible that Jessica and Nathan are the exception in terms of the depth of how students at Middleton or other liberal arts colleges think about the purpose of a liberal arts curriculum. Still, it is important to note their attention to multi-disciplinary learning and formation because it aligns so closely with the data from faculty in this study about the purpose of liberal arts education. The student comments reviewed in this section are particularly significant to this study because the faculty and student stakeholder groups explicitly said that this kind of formation would be difficult to achieve online. As we have seen, student participants in this study were looking for more than just an efficient way to learn information. In different ways, administrators, faculty, and students expressed their value for the kind of integrated student formation that Lowe and Lowe (2010) identify, which includes intellectual, social, moral, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. A truly integrated process of student formation should include both curricular and co-curricular elements.

## **Co-Curricular Learning and Formation**

Administrators said that moving liberal arts education online would undermine student learning because valuable co-curricular experiences would be lost. Students agreed.

Administrators said that co-curricular learning is important, but student interviews helped to demonstrate why this kind of learning is important. Students often listed examples of co-curricular learning when talking about which experiences at Middleton had shaped them the most. This represents a glaring blind spot for the faculty in this study, who despite their attention to embodied learning, largely ignored the co-curricular aspect of learning.

Madeline is one example of a student who emphasized her co-curricular learning. She said that her experience as a resident assistant (RA) in her residence hall as a junior was formative for her because it honed her interpersonal and leadership skills:

I was so passionate, so committed, and then my residents show up and they are semi-interested in me. But mostly just ready to do their own thing. And they were so excited to be independent. And they don't really want to go to anything that my leadership planned. It's like, oh, ok. But then when their boyfriend breaks up with them, then they expect me to be there. I just realized, I learned so much about myself during that year because it was an experience I thought was going to be super fun and great. It was great, it was not fun. In fact, most of the year was pretty hard and brutal. And so I think that gave me the opportunity to learn so much about myself and what I wanted my relationships to look like and how I was going to prioritize things that I needed in terms of the things that other people around me needed. And I think that was definitely one of the most shaping experiences (laughs).

Jessica described another example of how campus experiences can facilitate co-curricular learning. She participated in an apprenticeship program where she was a member of a student team that planned the on campus chapel experiences for students. In her description, you can see how the liberal arts focus of the curriculum at Middleton sets the stage for learning on campus outside the formal classroom setting. Jessica said:

I think one of the most important things is the Worship Apprentice Program because the people come in from all different majors. We had psych majors, pre-sem majors, music, strategic communications, international relations, I'll mention math and science, all across the board, coming together with a common purpose to worship and facilitating Christian community on campus. So having that common bond but still being able to celebrate our differences, and approach our purpose from all different sides, was I guess an experience in which I've learned a ton, not about just other people but also myself and how I fit into the body of Christ, and how different people's gifts can complement each other and things like that. So I'd say that was one of the most shaping experiences, especially because it was also a learning context. It's an apprenticeship type kind of thing. So [a student affairs staff person] would oversee it. We would get to interact with professors or [the campus chaplain], and different people who had all this learning and could share it...so yea, it was just learning outside the classroom, but just as much as inside the classroom.

In both of these examples, the students mention how much they learned about themselves. This is another aspect of student experiences that were not addressed in faculty and administrator interviews. Faculty and administrators acknowledged that students explore and discover their personal vocational callings while at Middleton. However, self-knowledge was not included in

the list of knowledge areas that faculty and administrators said were essential to liberal arts education.

When asked about his most formative experiences at Middleton, Nathan gave examples where academic learning combined with experiences beyond the classroom that were not a part of the academic curriculum. He said:

I would say, honestly? The academic educational experiences that have been clearly in an academic learning setting, but have explicitly not been about that as an end. I would say. So for instance a philosophy class where it was kind of a philosophy class, and the professor was adamant about studying thinkers who were against academic philosophy as an end unto itself, but were for philosophy as a way of life. And another class was a class about the church, and it was all in preparation for and in the process of us discerning a call to ministry. And then this past internship I took this past summer, was also a part of this program. So it's called Jubilee Fellows. And that was also explicitly an educational, learning experience that goes along with an academic program, but the academic program isn't the end in itself. The academic program is supposed to help us discern and grown as ministers. And so I would say, the most growth I've had was when academics were realized for what they are, and that is a means unto an end, and that is not some time of utilitarian end of making money, or succeeding in academia, or the 'real world' which is funny cause academia is part of the real world. And I would say that's just the end would be having your way of life changed by it.

In all three of these student examples, the interpersonal interactions that happened outside the classroom were critical to student formation. Co-curricular experiences helped students to learn about themselves, explore their personal vocations, and gain interpersonal and leadership skills

that will help them to be better citizens. These are precisely the kinds of insights and skills that administrators and faculty had said would be difficult to develop in online settings alone.

Much of the attention in this dissertation so far has been focused on the compatibility of online learning to the academic, curricular components of liberal arts education. However, these student stories show that on campus co-curricular learning is important to students, and should be considered when examining the implications of online learning for liberal arts education.

### **Faculty to Student Interaction**

Interaction between faculty and students was a topic that came up repeatedly throughout interviews with every stakeholder group. Every group believed personal interaction was a catalyst for liberal arts learning. Plainly, no stakeholder group was convinced that technology-mediated interaction would improve learning. Although some faculty had a high view of hybrid learning, these faculty still advocated for face to face interaction in hybrid courses. In fact, each group said that something essential is lost when interaction only occurs through technology. In their interviews, students focused on three types of interactions they had with faculty: a) classroom interactions, b) personal relationships between faculty and students, and c) faculty feedback and availability.

### **Face to Face Classroom Learning**

There are conflicting accounts in the literature regarding whether students prefer face to face or online learning (Bacow et al., 2012). However, the students interviewed in this study overwhelmingly preferred face to face learning. When asked to compare face to face classroom learning with online learning, students revealed their preferences for interacting with professors in face to face formats. Alena said that she preferred face to face class. One of her comments hints at why:



[Online] probably makes it easier to not pay attention. Of course lots of people don't pay attention in the classroom, kind of. My favorite classes aren't really necessarily the ones with the most interesting information, but the most engaging combination of professor and student group.

In expressing her preference for classroom learning, Megan talked about her desire for the spontaneity and "immediate dialogue" that was also expressed by faculty participants in this study. In describing her online learning experiences, Megan said:

If I compare the online class to a campus setting, being on campus and being in a classroom. I'm just, I would always prefer the classroom. It just feels like, even if you're watching your professor deliver his or her lecture via YouTube, that's great and you can pause it and rewind it and still take notes and that's fine. But you can't have that immediate dialogue. Or if it's a question then they respond to you. There are forums for having discussion for a class that may or may not be graded, but there's always going to be a lag time. There's going to be some kind of miscommunication. Either because there's a problem with the technology, someone can't figure out how to upload their comments, or someone is talking about something and they're not as articulate, or, someone, it just goes over another classmate's head and they're just really not all that related to the idea. And there's no way to mediate, and say, can you clarify, or sometimes there's not a way to like reply to a thread that...so as good as my online experience at Middleton was, I had such...(long pause)...

After a long silence of Megan working through her ideas in her head, she finally expressed that she thought she gets the "maximum" out of her education when she is being surrounded by other people who she can interact with. In the above statement, which describes her preference for face

to face settings, Megan reveals her extraverted personality type. As we saw from Chapter 4 and 5, administrators and faculty speculated that introverts would be more likely to prefer online learning than extraverts.

However, despite her preference for face to face learning, Megan had positive things to say about her online experience with Middleton:

It was a little bit strange because I never met [my English professor] face to face during the whole semester. He pre-recorded lectures, and uploaded them to Youtube. We would watch him, so I knew what he looked like. And we had done at the very beginning of the semester, we had done this group chat, so he kind of knew us, but not everyone's Skype was working, and there were some glitches in the system. So it was just kind of odd to never meet him face to face. Although he was already readily available through email. I felt, that he was there to support us just as much as if we were a regular classroom, in a regular classroom setting. So I think I emailed him a lot (laughs). Just because I wanted to be sure I wasn't doing anything wrong, and he was always very very helpful. He always responded readily.

Christi, who's body language in her interview was more timid and perhaps introverted, expressed a similar preference for face to face instruction, even for lectures. Her experience contradicts the optimism expressed by faculty and administrators about the potential benefits of "flipping" classes by putting content and lectures online. Christi reflected that her flipped biology classroom received mixed reviews from the students in her class. According to Christi, not being able to interact with the faculty member in person while watching a recorded lecture at home was a problem for some students. She explained:

One of my biology classes tried [a flipped class]. It was...interesting. Cause they would post online, like what you were supposed to read, and then they would have these lectures before the lecture, but basically what they were trying to do was in their video, explain all of the concepts and stuff so that it was basically more like questions and stuff like that during the actual class time. And some people really liked that and some people really didn't...I think people are used to being able to ask questions during the lecture. Like when they're starting off all those concepts, so I think that trying to get all those concepts done before you go to class, I don't know if that was actually working for students. Because then if you didn't understand a big concept, then you wouldn't just have a few questions during the lecture (laughs). It would be like, could you re-lecture this entire thing...So instead of the teacher being able to go more in depth, into certain aspects, they would sometimes have to kind of reiterate what had been in the online lecture part of it. [A flipped class] could work because I mean, probably a good percentage of the class would be able to comprehend most of the lectures before, so then that would leave the question of, do you go with the plan that you've had for that lecture day of going more in depth, either leave those students to drop behind, or maybe ask them to come in after class or during the hours just to work through the section with them. Or you take time during the class for the few students who didn't comprehend the section to just go over the entire section again.

Consequently, it seems that a flipped class can be helpful. However, interacting with a professor in real time is important for class discussion as well as for learning content and understanding concepts via lectures. The immediacy of feedback and the space for questioning are traits of synchronous interaction that facilitate learning.

However, Nathan said that face to face classroom interaction between faculty and students was also crucial to liberal arts education at a deeper level. He said face to face interactions in class can humanize a professor, and by extension the course content.

*Nathan:* I think the prof as a human being is really huge. And so going back to what we were saying before, if your prof is a human being and you realize, oh they put out publications, and they're just like this prof from Harvard or Cornell, whoever published this book we're reading in class, you know? And they can have email correspondence from them. They're a human being, too. And you look back at the history of thought and the tradition you're studying and it's like, "oh they're all people." They're all finite, fallen, normal people who have had these ideas, these interactions with each other, and have built this history of thought. And now I'm in this train, and I'm a part of this, rather than saying, I'm studying this train of thought throughout history in kind of a dissociated way. And that puts you as an outsider, right? And as an outsider, I think you view yourself in relation to the material like really, really changes, you know? So there's a certain sense in which being in the classroom with the professor who is putting out publications, and is willing to have those conversations with you, makes you realize, hey, I'm actually a part of this, you know? (laughs).

*Interviewer:* So you talk about humanizing your professor, but it sounds like you're also humanizing Plato.

*Nathan:* Yea. And this is all hard to talk about without using certain terminology that I've learned in my classes. The Plato we know is an inherited interpretation of Plato. The

Aquinas we know, is an inherited interpretation of Aquinas. Augustine. Hegel. Same. Even someone recently, the Derida we know, is an inherited interpretation of Derida. And so if we were to take a step back from the academic institution and just be an online learner looking through the screen at these names that are far away and who they are is essentially what they think and there are these few ideas. You know. Plato had the Cave. (laughs). Plotinus has The One. Then I think we're dissociating ourselves so far from the academic institution that we think of people as these few pillars of ideas and we end up having just kind of simplistic and dogmatic conversations about them. But I think it's a lot richer to say, these were human beings and what we know and what we think about them is totally inherited and totally imperfect. And probably not exactly what they thought.

Nathan was unique in talking about how face to face classroom interactions between faculty and students can humanize a professor and course content. Still, student participants consistently referred to the importance of being able to ask professors questions in class in real time. At the same time, faculty concurred that hearing and responding to student questions during class is valuable to the instructor. In Chapter 5, Charles explained how he relied on visual cues from student body language to help him connect with students. Jinsol emphasized the value of student questions and comments, which can stimulate unanticipated direction and learning in class. As Charles said, online environments significantly “clip” these interactive and personal dynamics.

### **Faculty to Student Relationships**

Even if synchronous online interactions could be maximized, something important to the student participants would still be missing. For some students, the importance of interacting with faculty went beyond the classroom and included the desire to develop personal relationships with

faculty members. Nathan and Madeline both made frequent references to the important role that relationships with specific professors had played in their lives. This is consistent with the statements made by faculty and administrators about the important role that mentoring relationships between faculty and students can play in liberal arts education. Again, there is agreement among the stakeholders that relationships uniquely contribute to learning and formation. For example, Nathan said:

I've had a lot of really, really good professors, mentor figures who are willing to sit down and spend time with you. And I think that is really what hits home for the Middleton education in terms of offering somebody a slow and thorough walk to a more robust Christian worldview. Is those established Christian mentors and professors who you can have personal relationships with, and kind of model yourself after.

When asked what she thought were essential elements of a liberal arts education, Madeline spoke about her relationships with professors:

I think being able to talk with my professors to ask them my questions and I think that's where the real understanding is happening. It's not just in the passing on of information, but it's in that exchange between the professors and students, of really trying to reach an understanding. And I think at a place like Middleton, the fact that it is smaller, and you have so much access to your professors, and there is an intentional relationships that are taking place through like advising and that kind of stuff. There is so much more opportunity for that interchange to happen as opposed to like a giant lecture hall of 200 people and how are you supposed to (laughs) ask your professor what you're really wanting to know? ... I would say that's the key to my experience at Middleton.

Later in her interview, Madeline reiterated that her relationships with faculty were “key.” She said it this way:

I think the relationships with professors is key. I’m in pretty regular communication with my advisor and with [an International Development Studies professor] pretty frequently over email, but I get to a point where I just need to sit down with [first name of professor] and ask him to help me solve my life problems. And it’s because of the relationship that I’ve established with him in person that I feel comfortable just like walking into his office, and say, “Tell me what to do!” And I’m not sure that I could establish that same relationship with professors over the Internet... Those relationships are so formative for me, I would hate to deny those to anybody else.

Madeline elaborated on how her relationship with a professor and her time at Middleton had enabled her to explore questions of vocation, purpose, identity, and meaning. According to faculty and administrators, exploring these questions are essential elements of how students should experience formation through liberal arts education. According to Madeline, her personal relationships with faculty have been critical to her exploring these questions while at Middleton.

I mean [vocation] is a word that’s thrown around a lot. In the international development program we have the advantage of having [professor] as our leader who does a lot of talking about vocation, I think. Casts a very good vision for those of us who are his students. And I think in terms of finding your vocation at Middleton, I think it can get a little cloudy because it does become a buzz word. And people just throw it out there. But I think during my time here... for me I find I’ve found so much joy in that word, and so much promise and so much hope. I’m really feeling like there is a deeper calling and I know... and what I want is floating on the surface. It’s like, ‘oh that sounds nice.’ Those things can all point to those deeper

callings. And I think my liberal arts education gives me an opportunity to explore and find what that actually means wholistically. And it's not just a job. Not just a place. But it's all of these things coming together. All of these aspects of who I am, and really trying to articulate what that fundamentally means for who I am and what I want to be.

Participants from each stakeholder group in this study mentioned that mentoring relationships between faculty and students are a common way that students experience formation in liberal arts education. The ability to ask a question in class is important to students, but so is the opportunity to have extended personal conversation with faculty outside of class. Therefore, each group was concerned that moving liberal arts education would inhibit these relationships from developing, and would therefore undermine liberal arts education.

### **Faculty Feedback and Availability**

On the one hand, students described their preference for in person classroom interactions and personal relationships with faculty. On the other hand, students who had taken online courses at Middleton spoke positively about the level of interaction that had experienced with faculty online. Students described a high level of faculty availability and feedback that they had experienced in their online courses. Faculty feedback and availability was the aspect of online learning that students spoke most positively about. Jessica described the considerable amount of individualized feedback that she received from her professor:

We'd have to send emails once a week to our professor. And she would email back, so we'd talk about our learning for the week, and what we were doing, and she would send back these long responses that were very thought out, and it felt a lot like a conversation, like I really got to know her insights on my thoughts and this back and forth, and it added a richness to the material that I don't know if a regular classroom would provide, because



in a classroom setting there's time constraints of discussion and you know doing the assignments in the classroom. But when everyone does the outside work themselves and communicates from a point of knowledge already, then they're able to dig a little deeper sometimes. And I think our prof really facilitated that, and was very good about, "have you thought about this" "Look at it this way." Or "Here's some more background on your questions. We always had to send her questions, and she would answer those. I feel like she fostered learning beyond the material, and also made a personal connection over technology, which is something I didn't know if I was going to have.

Jessica was referring to Carol, the history professor whom we heard from in Chapter 5. As we saw from Carol's interview, she is committed to helping students develop critical thinking and reading skills. She also expressed the challenge of trying to do this online. Still, Jessica's quote shows that detailed and directed feedback in an online course can be a way to model critical thinking and questioning.

Christi, who took two online courses at Middleton, said she thought her online professors were more available to her than some of the professors in her face to face courses. She explained:

It was nice and easy to email [the professors], cause you know with online learning, it's not just the, "oh I'm available in my office from blank to blank," it was like, "oh you can email me at pretty much any time and I'll be able to get back to you."... You could email them with any of the questions and they would get back very quickly, or if you had something a little more difficult, then you could set up a meeting face to face."

Clearly, this kind of digital availability was received well by students. However, faculty pointed out that this level of online interaction comes with a cost. According to the faculty interviews, providing detailed and timely responses online to individual student questions and assignments is

quite demanding of faculty time. Further, it can be less time efficient than responding to student questions in class while meeting together face to face. Megan's comparison of her online courses at a local community college and her online course at Middleton alludes to the possibility that her level of faculty interaction at Middleton is different than the level of interaction available at other types of institutions:

So I was thinking back on my experiences with my Middleton online class and then my [community college] online classes. In [community college] I did a music class, and a geography class. And those were both very, you read the textbook, you take a quiz online. It was pretty different [from Middleton]... There weren't online forums. You didn't create a discussion on a wikipage with your classmates. You just kind of either read the text, wrote a paper, and submitted, or read the text, took a quiz, and submitted it. And it was a lot more impersonal. I preferred, even though getting the hang of the format of the online class at Middleton, even though that was a little bit more challenging in the beginning, I felt like I got a lot more out of it because you're getting feedback, not only from your professors, but other classmates. And you feel as though there's more of a support system of classmates because if I had a question in my geography or my music class, I only had my professor to go to. And this professor has not only my online class, but however many other class they're teaching. So I might not be their first priority. And it just, I don't know if I'm bias because I just love...and [community college] isn't bad. I'm not saying that. I just felt like the professors at Middleton are more, felt more invested in me as a whole. So hearing from [my Middleton professor], the same day or if you email him in the evening, the next morning. And really feeling as though he wanted me to succeed

The high degree of faculty availability and feedback that students described positively in their online courses was in contrast to an otherwise strong preference of students for face to face interactions with faculty inside and outside the classroom.

### **Student to Student Interaction**

With the exception of Nathan, every student participant spoke about the importance of student to student interaction in liberal arts education. Two students went so far as to say that interaction between students is an essential and defining aspect of liberal arts education. This is in agreement with administrators and faculty, who also acknowledged that students often learn from each other.

For Madeline and Megan, one purpose of a liberal arts education is to prepare students for interpersonal interaction. According to Madeline and Megan, one benefit of studying multiple disciplines is that it prepares students to interact with experts in those fields. Consequently, student interaction is a critical component of a multi-disciplinary liberal arts education. Therefore, students should have the opportunity to interact with people in many disciplines. Madeline explained:

For me, a liberal arts education means that you have the foundation to enter into all different fields and at least be able...and you have the basics there that you can gain...(laughs)...when I enter in I'm not an expert in biology, but I at least know the lingo enough that I can talk with the experts and understand what they're saying to me. So I have that foundation, I don't have all of the knowledge because I'm not specialized in every single area, I'm only specialized in a certain area. But I have this broad base of knowledge that allows me to enter into a conversation and be able to gain something.

Madeline offered an example of how her liberal arts education had helped her connect with others while at Middleton:

I'm not a science person, and [biology] is the class that also has a lab, so biology 115 class. So human biology. So we're doing a lot of anatomy and that's basically just trying to understand how the human body works. And I would say that's not an area that I was at all comfortable in. And I had to work pretty hard to keep track of all these minute details. But the fact that I was taking that class gave me an entry point with all these other peers of mine that were pre-med or super into bio, that I finally understood what they were talking about. And I think for them...I mean it was nice for me to be able to participate in those conversations, right? But for them, it was more than that. It felt like for them, I was taking an interest in what they were doing. And was actually trying to better understand what they were doing. And I think that's just an interpersonal relationship that is strengthened, because they feel that I am actually able to participate in something that they're interested in that's highly specialized and where I will never be an expert in. But at least I can ask a knowledgeable question now.

Megan, a literature major, also talked about how being "well-rounded" helps her to interact with others:

To me a [liberal arts education] just as basic as preparing students to be as well rounded as they can be within their 4 5 or 6 years of college. Equipping them with subject matter that they're not only majoring in, but subject matter that will enhance that major so that when they go out in the world...and I ended up being a literature major. I'm only ever going to run into literature majors. I'm running into people who are interested in all kinds of areas of study and I'm now equipped to talk to them about all kinds of different things

because I have a little bit of background in all these things...I think to, not only to have an individual, and I keep using the word well-rounded, but I can't really think of a better word than that. To make sure that an individual is well acquainted with multiple paths of study.

This emphasis on the social layer of a multi-discipline curriculum was different than the idealistic rhetoric of administrators and faculty. At the same time, students did not contradict those stakeholder groups. In fact, the social aspect of the curriculum fits into administrator and faculty categories of citizenship education. The following sections outline student comments about the role that interaction inside and outside the classroom can play in a liberal arts education.

### **Classroom Discussion**

Students expressed that interpersonal interaction is central to a liberal arts education. Many of their comments addressed the dynamics of face to face classroom discussion. Students said that classroom discussion was a critical aspect of their experiences at Middleton. They did not think this could be replicated well in online environments. Student to student discussion in class was a major way in which students described being formed during their time at Middleton. For example, Madeline said:

I think my international development classes have all been very important to me. In the IDS program, we only have four classes that are just IDS and everything else is interdisciplinary. All of our IDS classes are discussion based, which is different than most of the other classes that I've taken at Middleton. And I think there's a flavor there that is very unique and I think IDS students are pretty unique, too. Because even when there are discussion days in my other classes, even if they're like upper level econ or poly

sci classes, it's not the same caliber of conversation necessarily. I think IDS students are just so used to having those conversations and being pretty honest about how they feel or think. And so all of my IDS classes have just been fascinating as we wrestle with issues of what does it mean for Americans to go out and do development in other countries. What does that look like? How do you do that with a clear conscience? How do you do that in a way that's respectful and empowering as opposed to paternalistic? Yea, those classes have just been great. I've loved those. I think they really help us figure out how to articulate ourselves and communicate well with one another. And the level of thought is good.

When asked what would be missing in an online learning environment, Alena said:

Oh! (groans) I don't know, not to say people aren't the same on the Internet, there's just fun in being able to exchange a glance with the person next to you, or the way your professor makes weird jokes about a certain thing. It's just an experience for me that I think would be a lot better with people, people learning with you.

Alena described why she thought face to face discussion has such rich potential. Alena had never taken an online course, but commented that online learning sounded impersonal. She explained that "layers of experience" would be missing in online environments. Online environments would not have:

Someone saying, "Hey welcome to this class. Turn to the person next to you and introduce yourself. Let's start with this topic." Those are all things that, what they would mean to you varies a lot depending on who you're next to, how that person says it, where you are, how you're feeling about all of those circumstances, so I think there's maybe more room for better experiences or worse experiences because everything is happening

all at the same time. With more layers of experience, if that makes sense...A social layer between professors, you, and the students around you. Your physical location. The kind of classroom you're in, and the inflections of the voices of the people around you, like what you're learning, how it's laid out. All that stuff, are variables that maybe you wouldn't have as many in an online setting.

Alena speculated that online learning would undermine liberal arts education by inhibiting discussion between students. Alena noted that face to face discussion is simply easier than technology mediated discussion. She said:

I mean this is all based on my own outside bias. But just being up front (laughs). I think, maybe it depends on your learning style, too. For me, I like discussion and I like reading too, which obviously can be done either way. But discussion is a lot easier in person than it is through message board type stuff. That might be a hindrance. But that's just for me. Other people might enjoy being able to reflect on what you would like to respond, and then typing it out, that could be good too.

In this, Alena was willing to acknowledge that online discussion could work well for others, but through her words and body language, she communicated clearly that she prefers face to face communication. Megan's experience and reflection about the discussion aspect of her online class supports Alena's suspicion about online discussion. Megan said she preferred face to face discussion and explained why:

Part of it may be that I'm more of a tactile learner. So being able to have more senses involved with my learning than just sitting at a computer and looking at the screen and typing. I'm able to...for example, in my English capstone, it was led by a professor, and there were I think maybe a dozen of us. And it was one of those classes where it was

discussion based, and everyone just brought in information from their different classes all the time. And one day, a student brought in a film and said, “Oh, I was watching this over the weekend and there was a scene in it that I think perfectly relates to what we were talking about!” So he showed a clip of this film or someone else brought in a book that they were reading, and said, ‘Oh I think this really has something that relates to the Flannery O’ Conner short story. Let’s expound on that figure that we were talking about a bit.” And being able to pass things like that around, or stray from...not necessarily the syllabus, but stray from the main topic of conversation and have that be okay because we’re still being intellectual and we’re still...it’s not as though we started talking about something really weird, like what we’re doing for summer vacation. We’re talking about stuff that is academic, but it just might not be what the professor had planned on that day. And that was totally okay because we ended up learning something completely new and still very very helpful.

Megan continued by giving an example where her professor allowed the spontaneity of the face to face discussion to dictate the agenda for a class session. Her example supports the comments of Professor Jinsol that real time interaction and spontaneity in a classroom can enrich the learning experience. According to Megan, discussion in face to face settings can flow more freely, and is easier to facilitate. She explained:

I feel like the classroom setting is more adaptable. It’s able to...(pause)...so there are white boards in classrooms, so if we kind of stray from the main topic of conversation. Say we’re talking about Tolstoy or Flannery O’Conner, but we ended up talking about C. S. Lewis or something. The professor, or one of the other students is able to go to the white board and make a diagram or a flow chart, or something that makes a visual



interpretation of what we were just talking about. And how, “Oh let’s bring this kind of tangent conversation back to our original point.” And here’s this random visual graph or Venn diagram of how it all relates. And that goes into our notes and ends up being something that we’re tested on, or it ends up being a really crucial point in my term paper that I wouldn’t have thought of on my own. Whereas, if you’re in the discussion group online and there’s kind of this tangential conversation, I don’t feel as though there would be an easy way to bring it back to the original discussion question other than, “Oh well, that’s interesting, so let’s jump five steps back and start talking about whatever we were just talking about.”

Madeline offered additional detail about what makes face to face discussion distinctive, and why it is her preferred format. When I asked Madeline what would be lost if liberal arts education moved entirely online, she replied:

Well I think the biggest thing that I’ve mentioned is that discussion aspect. And I don’t think even an online discussion is not the same as just being in class with people and getting to know people. I think it’s harder to develop those relationships, too. Because who someone is online can be completely different from who someone is in person. And that can go both ways. You might hear more from them, or you might get more negativity from them than you would if you were sitting with them face to face. You might be able to have a more productive conversation with someone if you’re sitting down in the same room than if they’re typing it out can’t see how you’re reacting (laughs). So I think that discussion aspect is key.

Later, Madeline continued to say why face to face discussions are better than online discussions:

*Madeline:* I think you lose a whole piece of human communication that comes with the non-verbal. I've had discussions in class, thank you Ann Arbor public schools for that one, and you can see when people are getting defensive, when you're hurting them. I have friends that you know when they're about to explode and just say something because you're driving them crazy and they totally disagree with you. They start tensing up or they make a face because you said something you really disagree with. And you just miss that completely, when you're on an online discussion. In some ways, potentially typing your stuff out could eliminate some of the raw anger, but in other ways, it almost gives you the opportunity to do it without repercussion. Because you don't feel bad typing something really angrily because you just feel like, "Oh yea, look at that I wrote this really witty response," and you never see how it affects the other person. And just thinking back to discussions that I've had in my classroom, I can't really imagine them translating on a computer experience. I think you miss passion, both good and bad. You just don't get human to human (laughs) in the transcript.

*Interviewer:* So why is that so important?

*Madeline:* I mean that's the key of the liberal arts education, right? It's a wholistic education, so why wouldn't you be getting a wholistic human in the process of that? I don't want just your nice pretty arguments that you used a thesaurus and have all together. Because when I go out into the real world, that's not what I'm going to be faced with. I think you need to be able to communicate online. I think that should be a piece of it, but when I'm sitting in a meeting and I have people that are all mad at each other, I

need to be able to navigate that situation in real life. If I don't have that experience in college, then maybe I won't be ready for it. So I think there's huge value from a liberal arts standpoint of learning to have those discussions as well that you won't necessarily need to learn if it's all online.

Madeline's comments ring true with faculty comments that also stressed the need to have "whole people" present if true wholistic education is to happen. Her comments also corroborate Carol's claim that face to face settings are the better format for developing empathy. According to Madeline and Carol, the immediacy of witnessing a classmate's unfiltered physical response to a comment is a critical ingredient to developing empathy. Online discussion cuts off or attenuates these kinds of interactions.

Finally, Madeline also made a clear connection between classroom discussion and the civic goals of liberal arts education that both the faculty and administrator stakeholders had identified. Madeline did this by citing the important role that she believed classroom discussion should play giving students the opportunity to practice civic discourse. She said:

I think [liberal arts education] applies beyond work as well at this point Especially when it comes to having a discussion and being able to converse with people in a helpful and productive way. I think that happens, you know, everywhere! There you go, there's your discussion arena! Just looking at political discourse. We're heading into another election season and people don't know how to converse respectfully! And realize that you can still come to different conclusions and have a productive conversation. I think that's so valuable and so key. And yet so many people still don't know how to do that. (laughs).

To summarize this section, we observed the consensus between stakeholder groups regarding the role that face to face discussion should play in a liberal arts education.

From student comments, we see that students highly value face to face discussion, and that they prefer having discussions in face to face settings. Face to face discussion is simply easier and more enjoyable than technology mediated conversation. Additionally, real time face to face interaction provides more social cues, flows more freely, and is an easier format for developing relationships with other students. Student comments about classroom discussion support the claims made by faculty in this study that face to face classrooms are better than online environments at cultivating a sense of shared commitment, community, trust, and intimacy that enables critical discussion, student formation, and meaning making. In this way, students validated the claims made by faculty and administrators that face to face classroom settings enable lateral learning between students.

### **Interaction Outside the Classroom**

At one point in my interview with Alena, I told her that one of the other participants in the study believed that you could replicate the social experience of Middleton entirely online. I recalled the optimistic view of the online administrator, which differed from the other administrators. I was eager to get the “real” answer from students regarding whether they thought the social aspect of campus life could be transferred online. When I asked her what she thought about that idea, she responded:

(Big smile, laugh) I mean I don't agree, clearly!! (Makes a face as if this idea is ridiculous). Oh man. I think there's definitely people who that would work for, and there's people who that wouldn't work for. I know this is kind of weird, but I think introverted people would struggle with the whole online everything. Maybe not introvert, maybe outgoing, I don't know. I think there's something fake about everything being online. Like the way Middleton presents itself online, it's totally understandable, but to

me it's super cheesy. It doesn't do anything for me as a person. It serves a purpose definitely. I think Middleton is a community that physically inhabits this space. I don't feel like could be encapsulated well through the Internet. And maybe that goes to the layers of experience that I was talking about. There's just a lot more.

Other students commented similarly. Although Jessica said that online learning environments have the potential to connect people with other people they would not have otherwise met, she observed from her experience with an online course at Middleton that there was much less connection with her peers than in her face to face experiences. She reflected:

I think I didn't get to know my classmates very well. There wasn't much of that. You know, when you're in the traditional classroom, and they're talking about their day, and you can connect about the weather, and just some things like that. One thing leads to the next and you're talking about your dog who went for a walk and did something this weekend, and you went to a birthday party or something like that. So there's those common points of connection because of location that you can have in the classroom. Whereas, when people are spread everywhere it's less meaningful to say, "Yea, I went out for dinner last night!" "Ok, who cares, you're not there!" So I feel like I didn't connect as much with my classmates even though we did have some responding to each other's writing, which was really neat to just get to hear their voices or their thoughts.

One way that students said online learning undermines liberal arts education is that it cuts off interaction that happens on campus beyond the classroom. When asked if there were ways that online learning could undermine liberal arts education, Jessica responded:

Absolutely. So I mentioned before that with my music ed program, I'm in the same classroom with the same people all the time. And so having the core classes and to be

able to interact with people outside of my major face to face, it's great. And building those friendships, study groups, whatever you want to call that. Coffee and doughnuts at three a.m. working on a group project wouldn't happen maybe in an online context with people outside of my major. So yea I feel like traditional classrooms in a liberal arts context can foster that whereas online learning classrooms might detract from those connections and just face to face interactions, I guess. That would be one of the main things. I know there's other stuff. A starting place.

Jessica responded to my follow-up question about what would be missing if her entire degree had been earned online:

Well I would say a lot. I think it's important to have the balance of both [face to face and online]. I feel like that's not even just a question of liberal arts, I think that's a question of distance learning versus close learning. And then liberal arts is a continuation of that. But yea, so most of the, a lot of what I've learned about myself or how I've grown as a person has been relationships that I've built being in a space, in a community, and most of those have been fostered face to face, in shared experiences, locations, communities, and I feel like you couldn't have that. I've even talked to people who commute versus live in the dorms, and they miss some of that same you know, dorm life or whatever, and I think that can go for classroom learning versus online distance learning. So yea, I think a lot of it will be people connection, which I feel like is the purpose of a liberal arts education is to grow people. And equip them to connect with other people, why not start that now? You know? Why not have that aspect included and foster that? I'm not saying it can't be done. I'm just saying that for me personally, I feel like I would miss a lot and then I would have not have grown in the same way.

Christi brought up the topic of study groups. When asked whether she thought online learning would make it more difficult to learn, she said:

**Christi:** It was difficult to do any study sessions, for anything like that [in my online class]. It was hard to get to know other people in the class, cause I mean some of them did go to Middleton, but a lot of them were out of state, or they could be pretty much anywhere. So any sort of study session would be kind of like put together an [online] study sheet and then you can just add your notes to it or something like that.

**Interviewer:** So that's not the same.

**Christi:** It's not (laughs). It's not even close.

**Interviewer:** What's missing? Maybe it seems like an obvious question, but what is missing when you do that just collaborate and put stuff on the sheet? What would help your learning that you're not getting?

**Christi:** Pretty much just people's information. It's not like us saying, "oh let's go over this question together" and then each person has their different say, and some of it you might have missed, which might have been important, whereas just copying and pasting it to a sheet, if you don't know the information that's there, then there's no one there to help you understand it.

Together, these comments express the importance of interaction beyond the classroom in support of academic learning and personal growth. These comments also reveal student desire for relational learning with others in the same physical space.

### **Chapter Summary**

The student interviews in this study added much-needed student voices to the conversation about online learning in U.S. higher education. Student interviews also served as a check to see if the administrator and faculty ideas of liberal arts education had any traction with students. Though the perspective and rhetoric differed, students affirmed the account of liberal arts education put forth by administrators and faculty. Students also iterated the same concerns as administrators and faculty regarding how online learning could undermine the interactive nature of liberal arts education.

Students identified student formation as the core purpose of liberal arts education. This formation requires curricular and co-curricular elements to work in tandem. Wholistic formation includes learning about oneself, and developing interpersonal and leadership skills. According to the student participants, wholistic student formation would be difficult to achieve online because it would lack certain kinds of face to face interaction. Robust student formation requires interaction between students and faculty in the classroom, through personal relationships, and faculty feedback and availability. Student to student interaction is similarly necessary. Classroom discussion and student interaction beyond the classroom both uniquely contribute to student formation. Purely online learning would inhibit effective interaction between faculty and students, and between students. Students who had enrolled in online courses at Middleton had positive things to say about those courses. However, they did not seem to believe that adding online courses or elements would improve their learning.



## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the participants in this study offer valuable insight to the potential future of online learning in liberal arts education. This final chapter returns us to the original research questions for this study and briefly summarizes the findings. Finally, this chapter closes with some conclusions about the future of online liberal arts education.

#### Research Questions

##### Essential Nature and Core Purpose of Liberal Arts Education

The first research question for this study was: *What understandings exist among relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college regarding the essential nature and core purpose of liberal arts education?*

Together, the stakeholder groups interviewed in this study described the essential nature of a traditional liberal arts education as an intimate and deeply personal form of education that addresses basic existential questions of individual and civic purpose. As expected, participants in this study highlighted the importance of Socratic classroom discussion. Each stakeholder group agreed that interactive learning and strong interpersonal relationships are essential curricular and pedagogical features of liberal arts education. Every stakeholder group described how this interactive and social pedagogy takes place in the classroom but also extends beyond the classroom on campus; either in co-curricular activities or interpersonal relationships. Strong student to student relationships and student to faculty relationships are both catalysts for deep liberal arts learning.

However, stakeholder groups differed when describing the core purposes of liberal arts education. Faculty said that a liberal arts education should foster certain thinking and

communication skills that enable students to be good citizens. Faculty believed that the purpose of studying multiple disciplines in a liberal arts education was for students to learn to use the frameworks of the various liberal arts disciplines to understand and engage in the world. Administrators agreed that the purpose of a liberal arts education should be to learn certain thinking and communication skills. However administrators emphasized the importance of mastering certain bodies of liberal arts knowledge. According to administrators, gaining basic liberal arts knowledge is foundational for being an informed and contributing member of society. Student understandings of the core purpose of liberal arts education did not focus on specific liberal arts disciplines, knowledge, or skills. Instead, students expected their liberal arts education to spur on their own spiritual growth, self-knowledge, interpersonal relationships, and sense of purpose.

One unexpected theme that I uncovered in this study was the special emphasis by the faculty on embodied learning and embodied pedagogy. According to the faculty, the essential nature of liberal arts education is embodied learning that addresses the whole person; mind, body, heart, and spirit. In order to achieve truly embodied learning, full human bodies must be physically present together. On the one hand, there was strong agreement between stakeholder groups regarding the essential nature of a liberal arts education. On the other hand, administrators, faculty, and students differed in how they emphasized particular features of a liberal arts education.

### **Challenging and Undermining Liberal Arts Education**

The second research question for this study asked: *To what extent do relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college believe that online learning challenges or undermines a traditional liberal arts education?*

The consensus between stakeholder groups, with the exception of the technology administrator, was that a traditional liberal arts education is not compatible with a fully online degree. Simply put, every stakeholder group agreed that moving a degree entirely online would undermine the essential nature and core purposes of a liberal arts education.

Administrators did not believe all essential liberal arts courses were compatible with online delivery. For example, courses that require interactive problem solving or include complex labs simply could not be replicated online. In this way, not all essential liberal arts knowledge could be gained online. Administrators believed that certain liberal arts skills could not be developed online either. Although one dean acknowledged that the skill of critical analysis could be learned online, he said that purely online degrees would undermine the process of education for citizenship. Education for citizenship should include developing interpersonal skills, which could not be learned without face to face interactions.

Administrators believed that an all online liberal arts education would also undermine essential elements such as student vocational discernment, community life, and good teaching. In terms of pedagogy, administrators said that faculty feedback, accountability, and student performance are more difficult to achieve in online settings. Moreover, online learning inhibits effective interactive learning, which is a hallmark of liberal arts education. Online learning also undermines liberal arts education because the availability of low quality online education makes it easier for students to include low quality transfer credit as a part of their overall liberal arts education.

Faculty participants said that a purely online degree would undermine each of the essential elements of liberal arts education identified by faculty participants: a) multi-disciplinary

approach, b) liberal arts skills, c) embodied learning, d) faculty to student interaction, and e) student to student interaction.

Many faculty concerns about online learning undermining liberal arts education arose from their direct experience with online learning and from their belief that online learning is at its core, a disembodied experience. These disembodied experiences make it more difficult for students to develop meaningful relationships with each other and with faculty mentors. Disembodied learning disconnects students from the subject matter, but also from the faculty and fellow classmates. In turn, the subject matter, faculty, and classmates seem more abstract.

Spontaneity, classroom energy, and positive peer pressure can be lost in online environments. Faculty expressed that people can no longer rely on physical cues and body language when communicating with one another online. One faculty participant observed that students in his online courses are less respectful than students in his face to face courses. Faculty also noted that online environments make it more difficult for students to maintain motivation, and to develop the trust that is necessary for rich classroom dialogue. Importantly, faculty reported that online learning environments lower the sense of shared commitment to a class, the ability to develop trust between students, and establish a sense of classroom community. Trust, commitment, and a sense of community are important elements for classes that help students to make sense and meaning from newly acquired knowledge, skills, and experiences.

Although students reported positive experiences with online learning, they expressed a strong preference for face to face learning. Students spent considerable time describing how curricular and co-curricular experiences worked together to help them to explore a sense of vocation, purpose, and meaning. Interaction with peers as well as faculty mentors was essential to these experiences, which were particularly powerful when strong interpersonal relationships

could form with faculty members. Students agreed with administrators and faculty that technology mediated interaction alters and can undermine the quality of an interaction.

When asked, students did not believe that technology mediated interaction would improve learning. Instead, students thought it would be harder to pay attention online, and that face to face settings allow for spontaneous and immediate dialogue that wasn't as good online. Students said that they preferred face to face classroom discussion over online discussion. One student pointed out that in person discussion prepares students better for civic discourse as citizens. Others said that face to face discussion is simply easier logistically than online formats.

Students expressed a desire for face to face interaction to extend beyond the classroom with faculty, which could form personal mentoring relationships. Students indicated a desire to be known personally by their professors, and to be able to talk through their questions of purpose, vocation, and meaning with these professors. Students believed online learning was less personal, and that it would undermine the opportunity to develop these relationships. According to the students, moving online would inhibit the depth of these relationships, and consequently, liberal arts education. Students said that wholistic formation would be hard to achieve online because it would lack face to face interaction.

### **Supporting Liberal Arts Education**

The third and final research question for this study asked: *To what extent do relevant stakeholders of a liberal arts college believe that introducing online learning into liberal arts education can support the ideals of a traditional liberal arts education?*

Although each stakeholder group expressed ways in which online learning would undermine liberal arts education, there was also openness to online learning. The overarching sentiment of the administrators was that online learning has the potential to undermine the

essential nature and core purposes of a liberal arts education. However, there was also a sense of inevitability and compromise in their comments as they made room for hybrid options.

Administrators were willing to make room for some online learning as long as it was in small enough doses that it would not undermine co-curricular learning, campus community life, and the vocational discernment process for students. In hybrid courses, students could complete a considerable amount of their work independently, but would need to meet face to face for the critical discussion component of a liberal arts education. Administrators did not believe that adding hybrid components to liberal arts courses would necessarily improve learning. Rather, they said that hybrid components could be added without undermining learning.

Faculty also described ways that online learning had the potential to support liberal arts education. For instance, faculty said that introverted, motivated, and self-disciplined students were well suited for online learning. Faculty were quick to acknowledge that the Internet could serve as a supplemental instructional tool. In this vein, faculty described ways to leverage the Internet as a resource without fully disembodimenting the learning experience and undermining the sense of commitment, trust, community, and intimacy of the classroom and campus settings. Faculty said that online tools can connect students to online modules, new social networks, and can give students the chance to critically analyze the digital tools themselves. In examples such as these, faculty expressed optimism that hybrid formats could leverage the best of online and face to face formats in ways that could truly improve liberal arts education. By providing the right mix of synchronous, asynchronous, solitary, and communal experiences, instructors could take advantage of the space for reflection that online environments provide while also taking advantage of the physical aspects of a classroom or physical location.

Student participants believed that liberal arts education should be primarily face to face. However they did say that liberal arts education could be supported through the kind of asynchronous personal feedback that they had received via email from online instructors at Middleton. Otherwise, students expressed their strong desire for face to face learning.

### **The Future of Online Liberal Arts Education**

One surprising but significant finding from this study was the lack of attention that any of the stakeholder groups gave to the pervasive problem of continued rising costs of higher education. It is surprising that there was very little attention given to the issue of cost because so many advocates of online learning are hopeful that online learning might be able to decrease the overall cost of instruction by increasing efficiency (Bacow et al., 2012). However, not even the administrator participants in this study directly addressed the potential cost savings of moving instruction online. One possible explanation for the silence on the issue of cost is that efficiency is simply not a core value of the stakeholder groups.

Participants in this study did not address a striking and urgent problem for liberal arts education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The kind of relational, embodied learning described by participants in this study is expensive and getting more expensive each year. As many have demonstrated, the cost of services such as classroom instruction tend to rise more quickly relative to other kinds of goods and services (Archibald & Feldman, 2011; Baumol & Bowen, 1996; Bowen, 2012). Higher education is a service industry that requires an expensive, highly educated workforce. Moreover, technological change has tended to raise costs in higher education, not lower them (Archibald & Feldman, 2011). If educators do not find cost efficiencies in how liberal arts education is delivered, then this valuable form of education could become increasingly inaccessible. Thus, a critical question for liberal arts educators is this: how can liberal arts

education be delivered in new ways in a new world while still preserving its essential core? Data from this study begins to respond to this question from a pedagogical perspective. However responses to this question will also need to incorporate considerations of cost and market factors.

Administrative and economic factors aside, if the essential nature and core purpose of liberal arts education can be preserved in online settings, then theories of online learning should help us to design and implement this kind of learning. In Chapter 2, I introduced Anderson's (2008) model of online learning. Anderson's model outlines the six forms of interaction that are possible online. In mapping out these forms of interaction, Anderson (2008) hoped others would use his model to develop more robust theories of online learning. Although the data in my study did not lead me to develop a new theory of online learning, certain themes from my data present challenges and limitations to some of the assumptions underlying Anderson's model. Anderson iterates that theories of online learning should be couched within broader teaching and learning theories. Drawing from a broader literature of teaching and learning theory, Anderson assumes that good learning theories should be knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, learner-centered, and community-centered (2008).

Although online learning is often praised for its ability to establish online learning communities, the stakeholders' attention to the importance of embodiment in my study offers evidence to the contrary. Even Anderson (2008) offers a word of caution when discussing the idea of online social presence or online learning communities when he writes:

It may be more challenging than we think to create and sustain these [online] communities, and the differences may be more fundamental – differences that are linked to lack of placidness and synchronicity in time and place, the mere absence of body language, and the development of social presence. (p. 51).

According to the participants in my study, bounded-ness in time and place are critical ingredients for establishing relationships, trust, and community meaning making. According to stakeholders



at Middleton, online learning communities are virtual communities in the truest sense of the word. Online communities are almost, nearly, but not completely real communities. In other words, they are virtual, and not real embodied communities. Virtual communities are not without value. However at their best, online learning communities are only second best to embodied learning communities – particularly for communities that are pursuing liberal arts education. Therefore, the data from the participants in my study suggests limits for what might be included in theories of online learning. Those involved in liberal arts education should be concerned with developing theories of hybrid learning, rather than online learning. These theories should necessarily define the limits of online or hybrid learning, particularly when addressing the ideas of social presence, community, and embodied learning. These theories will be more useful to liberal arts educators because they will help to define what the possibilities and limits are for different learning formats.

Regardless of how educators theorize about the dynamics of teaching and learning online, if the most prominent national reports of online learning in higher education are correct, then the rise of online learning and the use of digital instructional tools will continue into the foreseeable future (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016; Johnson, Adams Becker, Cummins, & Estrada, 2016). Since 2003, the number of students enrolled in at least one online course has grown faster than overall enrollment in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2015). In recent years, enrollment in online learning has increased while at the same time overall enrollment in higher education has declined (Allen et al., 2016). The number of students in higher education who are not enrolled in any online course continues to drop (Allen et al., 2016). There is also evidence that the use of digital instruction in traditional face to face courses is increasing. According to the New Media Consortium's most recent report, the use of blended or hybrid learning models at

colleges and universities continues to rise (Johnson et al., 2016). These hybrid formats “take advantage of learning analytics, adaptive learning, and a combination of cutting-edge asynchronous and synchronous tools” (Johnson et al., p. 2, 2016).

Some predict that new technologies will continue to push the envelope in terms of learning formats. For example, The New Media Consortium recently predicted that so-called “augmented reality,” “blended reality,” and “virtual reality” technologies will cross over from the consumer sector of the economy to be repurposed for educational uses. Overlaying digital data on an individual’s field of vision will incorporate immersive technologies that “[bring] learners to deeper levels of cognition as they attain new perspectives on underlying data” (Johnson et al., p. 40, 2016). The New Media Consortium went even further to illustrate a future of robotics and so-called “affective computing” where facial recognition software could allow robots to detect boredom on the face of students and adapt its teaching method accordingly (Johnson et al., 2016). The rhetoric of such widely read reports on online learning and digital educational technology often have an almost religious tone and zeal in their excited rhetoric about how new digital technologies will transform learning experiences in ways previously never imagined.

However, making systemic predictions across the diverse range of institutions in U.S. higher education is risky business. A more sober look at national trends directs us to see that system wide pressures are having a differentiated impact on different sectors of higher education. Although enrollment in online learning continues to grow, there is more to the story than a simple, unquestioned march toward completely digital online learning. For instance, private, four-year baccalaureate institutions still have adopted online learning at a slower rate than other sectors (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Despite the rhetoric of technology enthusiasts, chief academic

officers nation-wide have consistently reported for the past thirteen years that less than one third of their faculty “accept the value and legitimacy of online education” (Allen et al., 2016). This belief has persisted during the same period that witnessed a dramatic increase in online enrollment. When recently surveyed directly, only 17% of instructors agreed or strongly agreed that online courses could “achieve student learning outcomes that are at least equivalent to those of in-person courses at any institution” (Jaschik & Lederman, 2015).

Despite widespread resistance to online learning, some liberal arts colleges are adding online courses and programs. It seems the rise of online learning will not leave liberal arts education unchanged. Therefore, another important question remains: how will the systemic growth of online learning and digital tools effect liberal arts education in the Digital Age? Adam Falk, President of Williams College, directs us to consider whether new digital technology will result in a revolution or evolution of liberal arts education in the Digital Age (Falk, 2014). Falk points out that some believe the “very fundamentals of a liberal arts education” will change as a result of new digital technologies (Falk, p. 96, 2014). However, he predicts that the “core fundamental” of education, at least at Williams College, will “remain intact” (Falk, p. 96, 2014). Part of this core of liberal arts education is a “slow, reflective, and difficult engagement with ideas” (Falk, p. 97, 2014). Although digital technology can play a role in this kind of education, it seems that new technology will not alter the core of liberal arts education.

Data from my study gives us clues as to whether the core of a liberal arts education will be fundamentally altered or whether it will remain intact amidst our shift to the Digital Age. Stakeholders of Middleton articulated quite thoroughly that liberal arts education is not compatible with fully online learning because the essential nature and core purposes do not align. According to the participants in this study, there is a gap between the capabilities of online

learning and the essential nature and core purpose of liberal arts education. On the one hand, participants from Middleton used words such as embodied learning, community, relationships, empathy, commitment, trust, vocation, spiritual formation, purpose, mentoring, virtue, self-knowledge, personal growth, worldview, and heart to talk about the essential nature and core purposes of a liberal arts education.

On the other hand, proponents of online learning tend to focus on other outcomes and aspects of education. For example, many hope that learning analytics will improve our understanding of how students learn certain concepts, which will allow for a more efficient way to teach these concepts to a diverse range of students. The term “learning analytics” refers to the practice of collecting and analyzing the digital data footprints of students by tracking their behavior in learning management systems, digital devices and social media (Long & Siemens, 2011). This kind of technology is useful for data tracking and for individualizing and improving the learning of course content for students (Johnson et al., 2016). In other words, the hope is that data gathered through various digital sources can enable educators to shape more effective learning environments online (Long & Siemens, 2011). However, these kinds of technologies are typically used for subjects such as business, math, or science where there are clear right or wrong answers (Bacow et al., 2012). As evidenced by the stakeholders in this study, liberal arts education requires much more than learning content or developing technical skills. It remains to be seen how technologies such as adaptive learning software and learning analytics could enrich student and faculty relationships in terms of intimacy, trust, empathy, and commitment that would enable students to better understand their sense of purpose or vocational calling in life.

In our eagerness to incorporate learning analytics into instructional design, I recommend caution and careful attention to the host of questions related to data collection, measurement, and

drawing conclusions from digital data. Although large amounts of digital data can be easily collected, stored, and analyzed, it is important to be careful in assessing the validity of these data collection tools. Said another way, we should be careful to ensure that digital data collection tools are in fact measuring the outcome or behavior that they are trying to measure. At the same time, educational researchers and practitioners should be careful to acknowledge the limitations of these tools and the large amount of student behavior that is not able to be tracked through digital media.

A commonly cited reason for adopting online learning and digital tools is that these are more effective ways to engage college students who spend so much time using digital technology already. However, data from my study problematizes this argument for online learning. At least in my limited sample, students expressed a strong preference for face to face interaction, and said that technology mediated interaction was more impersonal, creating obstacles to meaningful discussion. As articulated by Falk:

College education isn't simply about the most efficient or most engaging means of transmitting information – it's about the creation and nurturing of a community of students, studying and learning together, in a particular kind of social and physical environment. (Falk, p. 98, 2014).

Therefore, I propose that stakeholders of liberal arts education are not adopting online learning in large numbers because they have not yet seen a convincing rationale for how online learning could support or improve the distinct nature and purpose of liberal arts education. In other words, proponents of online learning are simply not addressing the embodied pedagogy, experiences, and outcomes that stakeholders of liberal arts education care about.

This appears to be the case at Middleton, though there are certainly unique contextual factors at play. It is important to note that Middleton is a Christian liberal arts college with a particular theological emphasis and philosophical worldview. This worldview is particularly attentive to a theology of embodiment and vocation, which can be observed throughout the stakeholder interview transcripts. Within the theological tradition at Middleton, terms such as embodiment and vocational formation are particularly theologically loaded terms. In other words, the liberal arts mission at Middleton is enmeshed with the theology of the institution. In this way, it is hard to disentangle the essential nature and core purpose of liberal arts education at Middleton from its particular Christian identity. Therefore, articulating a convincing rationale for offering online learning at a place like Middleton would necessarily need to incorporate a theological rationale for moving critical aspects of spiritual formation and learning to online settings.

Although this study was conducted at a single institution with a particular theological accent, the significance and implications of the findings in this study reach beyond religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges. Concepts such as embodied learning and meaning making are also important aspects of liberal arts education more broadly. The data from this case study is informative for any institution that is involved in the project of delivering a four year degree that includes aspects of liberal arts education. The convincing rationale for why a large research university would offer online liberal arts courses or programs will likely be different than that of a small liberal arts college. For example, the existing economies of scale at a large research university are different than that of a small liberal arts college. Therefore, factors such as student to student relationships, establishing classroom trust, and faculty to student relationships will play out differently in different contexts. In other words, moving a course that has several

hundred enrolled students in a section would involve different tradeoffs related to features such as student to faculty relationships, trust, and embodied learning than a moving a section of thirty students. Each institution that is involved in liberal arts education should take note of the gap between the essential features of liberal arts education discussed in this study and the rhetoric of much of the online learning literature.

Despite the disconnect between the promises of online learning and the essential nature and core purposes of liberal arts education, data from my study indicates that online learning will play a role, albeit limited, in liberal arts education. Openness to hybrid learning formats was a point of similarity between the stakeholder groups in my study, with strong support from some faculty. My conclusion is that hybrid learning will become a staple of liberal arts education because hybrid formats can minimize the potentially negative, isolating, or disembodied aspects of online learning. At the same time, careful course design can maximize the benefits of both face to face and online formats. Hybrid learning can combine experiences of solitude and embodied community in ways that encourage meaningful relationships that maximize the affordances of different learning environments and tools. In doing this, hybrid learning can retain the essential nature and core purpose of liberal arts education. In this way, the liberal arts education sector will likely mimic the rest of higher education, which is predicted to continue to incorporate hybrid educational models (Johnson et al., 2016). Still, liberal arts education will be wise to keep online learning bounded in ways that preserve the nature and purposes of liberal arts education.

In closing, my recommendation is that those invested in liberal arts education should not approach digital technology and online learning with fear, but rather careful skepticism. As demonstrated by the participants of this study, online learning has the potential to seriously

undermine long-held and valuable features of liberal arts education. At the same time, each stakeholder group identified ways that online and hybrid learning might be incorporated in ways that are compatible with the essential nature and core purposes of liberal arts education. Therefore, decisions about hybrid and online learning should be made from knowledge gained from empirical research. In order to do this, more focused research is needed on particular essential elements of liberal arts education and online learning. Many of the essential elements of liberal arts education that were identified by stakeholders in this study could be tested to see if they translate well to online settings. For example, further research could test how well online or hybrid learning environments foster shared commitment, trust, empathy, and the ability to critically engage one's peers in discussion. More research should also be done to understand how embodied learning relates to the formation of memories, as well as the emotional and physiological aspect of liberal arts education.



## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A: Student Interview Protocol**

### **Warmup, 'Grand Tour' and Rapport Questions**

1. Let's get started by talking about your time at Middleton. (*Grand Tour Question*). Tell me a little bit about what it is like to be a student at Middleton.
2. What are the experiences that have shaped you and taught you the most during your time here? Why were these experiences so shaping?

### **Essential Features and Purpose of Liberal Arts Education**

3. Middleton describes itself as a liberal arts college. What does this term mean to you?
4. What are the essential parts of a liberal arts education? Why?
  - a. How important are your 'core' courses? Why?
5. From your experience, what do you see as the central purpose of a liberal arts education?
  - a. What about Middleton?
6. Can you tell me about the class(es) or experiences that have:
  - a. Been the most intellectually demanding for you, most pushed your thinking?
  - b. Helped you to grow as a 'whole person'?
  - c. Would you consider your courses to be 'learning communities'?

### **Online Learning & Liberal Arts**

7. When I use the term 'online learning' what does this mean to you?
  - a. Have you taken an online course? If so, what that was like for you?
8. As we think about the purpose of a liberal arts education, can you imagine ways that online learning could improve how this kind of education?
9. On the other hand can you think of any ways that online learning might challenge or even undermine this kind of education? Why?
  - a. How might the particular subject of the course influence this?
10. If you became a faculty member, and were asked to develop an online course that would most closely align with 'the Middleton liberal arts experience' how might you set up your class?
11. Are there important aspects of a liberal arts education that students would 'miss' if they were to earn a liberal arts degree online?

## **APPENDIX B: Faculty Interview Protocol**

### **Warmup, ‘Grand Tour’ and Rapport Questions**

1. Tell me a little bit about what it is like to be a faculty member at Middleton.
2. Let’s get started by talking about why you chose to be a faculty member at Middleton. (*Grand Tour Question*)

### **Essential Features and Purpose of Liberal Arts Education**

3. Middleton describes itself as a liberal arts college. What does this term mean to you?
4. What are the essential parts of a liberal arts education? Why?
5. From your experience, what do you see as the central purpose of a liberal arts education?
  - a. What about a Middleton education?
6. In general, what would you say are some of the main benefits or ‘key takeaways’ that students gain from their time here?

### **Online Learning**

7. When I use the term ‘online learning’ what does this mean to you?
  - a. Have you taught an online course? If so, what that was like for you?
8. As we think about the purpose of a liberal arts education, can you imagine ways that online learning could improve this kind of education?
9. On the other hand can you think of any ways that online learning might challenge or even undermine this kind of education? Why?
  - a. How might the particular subject of the course influence this?
10. If you were required to develop an online course that would most closely align with ‘the Middleton experience’ how might you set up your class?
11. Are there important aspects of a liberal arts education that students would ‘miss’ if they were to earn a liberal arts degree online?

## **APPENDIX C: Academic Administrator Interview Protocol**

### **Warmup, ‘Grand Tour’ and Rapport Questions**

1. Let’s get started by talking about why you chose to work in your particular role here at Middleton.  
(*Grand Tour Question*)
2. Why are you in an administrative position instead of a teaching faculty position?

### **Essential Features and Purpose of Liberal Arts Education**

3. Middleton describes itself as a liberal arts college. What does this term mean to you?
4. What are the essential parts of a liberal arts education? Why?
5. From your experience, what do you see as the central mission of Middleton?
6. In general, what would you say are some of the main benefits or ‘key takeaways’ that students gain from their time here?

### **Online Learning**

7. When I use the term ‘online learning’ what does this mean to you?
  - a. Have you taught an online course? If so, what that was like for you?
8. As we think about the purpose of a liberal arts education, can you imagine ways that online learning could improve this kind of education?
9. On the other hand can you think of any ways that online learning might challenge or even undermine this kind of education? Why?
  - a. How might the particular subject of the course influence this?
10. If you were required to develop an online course that would most closely align with ‘the Middleton experience’ how might you set up your class?
11. Are there important aspects of a liberal arts education that students would ‘miss’ if they were to earn a liberal arts degree online?
12. What factors do you think administrators at liberal arts colleges should consider when deciding whether their institutions should offer online courses and/or programs?
  - a. If there are key tensions, what do you think they are?

## APPENDIX D: List of Participants

### Faculty

Name	Disciplinary Background	Title	Taught Online?
Charles	English	Associate Professor, Dept. Co-Chair	Yes
Carol	History	Professor	Yes
Kyle	Philosophy	Professor	Yes
Mary	Education	Assistant Professor	Yes
Katrina	Education	Assistant Professor	Yes
Donald	Latin, Classics	Associate Professor	Yes
Jodi	Art & Art History	Professor, Dept. Chair	Yes
Sarah	English	Professor	No
Bennett	History	Professor	No
Jinsol	History, Classics	Professor	No

### Academic Administrators

Name	Discipline	Title	Taught Online?
Matthew	Political Science	President	Yes - Hybrid
Theresa	Sociology	Provost	No
Luke	Classical Languages	Academic Dean: Arts, Languages, Education	No
Steve	Physics	Academic Dean: Math & Natural Sciences	No
Richard	Education	Assistant Director Teaching & Learning (Technology Staff)	Yes

### Students

Name	Major	Minor	Completed Online Class?
Jessica	Music Education	N/A	Yes
Megan	Literature	N/A	Yes
Christi	Biology	N/A	Yes
Alena	History and Classics	Latin and International Relations	No
Nathan	Religion, Greek, Philosophy	N/A	No
Madeline	International Development Studies	French	No

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