

Nations Road

What is it to be a “college town”? Where I am from, it is to approach the end of August with a groan, as thousands of new young faces come seeping into town from across the country.

Growing up, the walls of Iona college seemed intimidating, as though education were something separate from the rest of the community. I had the impression that academia and community life were entirely oppositional; if you wanted to excel in one space, the other must take a backseat.

As a liberal arts student in the quiet town of Geneseo, I have learned the complete opposite. The greatest reward of a liberal arts education lies in stepping outside of the classroom, and employing the lessons learned across various academic spaces alongside those learned through the community itself.

When I arrived at SUNY Geneseo, I had not done much research into the school itself; all I needed to know was that it was a state liberal arts school, away from the noise of downstate New York. Daunted by the new environment, I initially chose to spend all of my time wandering between my dorm room and the library; I maintained that I was attending college for a degree, and that anything outside of my English major was fairly irrelevant. However, outside major credit requirements quickly forced me out of this physical and disciplinary isolation. A Black studies professor offered me the opportunity to assist with editing the in-progress monograph of Dr. David Herd from Canterbury, England. While this process was extremely rewarding, there was also a public event before he left: a walk in solidarity with refugees and detainees across the world.

At this walk, I was enthralled by the stories Dr. Herd and others shared about indefinite detention and migration in the United Kingdom. He asked the attendees, as a collective, to consider the importance of their issues in their own locale. As I walked the length of the village

for the first time, I learned about Geneseo's four active police forces, prison, and nearby ICE detention facility from students and professors across academic concentrations. In this moment, I first felt the true multidimensional value of an interdisciplinary education. Liberal arts education creates space for the knowledge that is only available through cross-disciplinary collaboration; rather than remaining content with perspectives from one subject, students are encouraged to engage with different academic standpoints. However, the greatest reward of this interdisciplinarity is not expertise in academe for its own sake. It is the chance to use this collaboration to motivate action, and create a bidirectional relationship between coursework and community engagement.

COPLAC's approach highlights the necessity of connecting education to the location it occurs on, taking care to acknowledge how experiencing a place and its people can convey what books cannot. Education informs community engagement, and the community climate informs a classroom; neither the village, the campus, nor the country exist in isolation, and ideas gleaned from one inform experiences in the other. I once failed to consider the value of anything beyond English literature, but lessons from my own discipline and others called me to dismantle that division. In English courses, I read John Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* poems, and considered the notion of "contrast"; must the life in *Il Penseroso*, of learning "far from all resort of mirth," be wholly opposed to that of *L'Allegro*, where one declares "Mirth, admit me of thy crew"? Studying philosophy, I encountered the ever-present tension between logic and human experience through theories of knowledge; although one may seek to act exclusively from the rules of logic, life inevitably calls us to do and consider otherwise. Even in an introductory drawing course, the professor covered the science of anatomy and proportions of the human

body, while emphasizing how this studied information means nothing to an artist without repeated real-life application.

The significance of this relationship between interdisciplinary education and community engagement granted by a liberal arts institution became most evident over the past year. I personally found myself unable to return to New Rochelle and remained in this part of Western New York, which was newly abandoned by its regular college attendees. During the first stretch of quarantine, I felt a defeating disconnect from the academic world I had grown to love. Then, like many others, I began to walk. Just to get outside of my apartment, I walked to the neighboring town of Mount Morris, ran laps across the silent campus, and biked to do my groceries.

When I lost the classroom, the town became where I applied my digital education. The interdisciplinary nature of a liberal arts institution motivated my eventual investment in the Geneseo community itself. Throughout the past summer, I collaborated with Geneseo students and residents to have events in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement against systemic racial injustice. We spoke with residents involved in local politics, long-time activists, professors, students, and alumni; whenever we met, I witnessed the worth of varied disciplinary perspectives in real-time, applied to identify routes of action and change. I learned the history of the land itself, which sits in the territory of the Seneca Nation of Indians. While the world of my senior year of college is not the one I began with, these values of interdisciplinarity and active participation in community have remained with me throughout, and crossed paths in ways I could have never predicted when I began as an undergraduate liberal arts student.

As each of us remain in our homes, we recollect on our connection to the places we once enjoyed and knew. However, as students and world citizens, we still seek out ways to take

knowledge beyond our ever-changing classrooms. The liberal arts allow us to adapt, and the importance of an active approach to community engagement remains; even as academic work continues behind an individual screen, we can continue to bond with the communities that ground us.