

**“The Liberal Arts Plus”
Baccalaureate Address
Ronald D. Liebowitz
May 24, 2014, Mead Chapel**

Good afternoon. On behalf of the faculty, staff, and trustees of the College, I extend a warm welcome to you, the Class of 2014, and to your parents, families, and friends who have joined you on campus this weekend to celebrate your accomplishments.

Today we celebrate the successful completion of your Middlebury degree as well as your contributions to our community and the world beyond the College. And, of course, since this is Commencement weekend, we look ahead, as well, to the opportunities that await you as you begin the next chapter of your lives.

Let me begin, as I always do on this occasion, by telling you some things about the graduating class:

- There are 644 graduates in this class (including February and May graduates): 301 men and 343 women.
- The most popular major among graduates is economics with 112 students. The next most-popular majors are, in order: political science, environmental studies, English and American literatures, and international and global studies.
- More than 80 percent of you studied at least one language other than English during your years at Middlebury, and 15 percent of you attended the College’s intensive summer Language Schools.
- Fifty-nine percent of you studied abroad, and you did so in 45 different countries.
- Seventeen percent of the class completed a joint or double major.
- More students hail from New York, followed by Massachusetts, Connecticut, California, and New Jersey.
- Sixty-one members of the Class of 2014 come from outside the United States, representing 32 different countries.

Scores of you published papers in scholarly journals and presented your work at national conferences, most with a faculty mentor with whom you worked and conducted research.

The scholarly and creative energies of this graduating class were on display last month during the eighth annual Spring Student Symposium. One hundred fifty-three of you presented scholarly and creative works, which reflects how a liberal arts education cultivates creative, independent thinkers, and how our students are eager to share their endeavors with the wider community.

During the past year, members of this class played leading roles in the College Choir, in the African Music and Dance Ensemble, the Community Chorus, the Chamber Music Ensemble, and the Sound Investment jazz Ensemble.

Five members of the class either have been or will be members of the Potomac Theatre Project, the College's affiliated professional theatre company in New York City. Four seniors were in the cast of *Pentecost*, the Theatre Department's fall production that took home an astounding eight national awards.

Also in the arts, five dance majors toured Trinidad and Tobago, Philadelphia, and Monterey, California, with the Dance Company of Middlebury. Seniors in the program taught others to dance in the U.S. and Japan, and earned scholarships to dance festivals in Maine and Montana.

In athletics, 146 members of this class played on varsity teams; some were members of teams that won 11 NESCAC championships and one national title. One hundred eight varsity athletes were named to all-academic teams for their

achievements in the classroom *and* on the playing fields. Parenthetically, but not really, Middlebury had the greatest number of all-academic student-athletes in NESCAC this past year, something about which we are very proud.

The U.S. Department of Energy's International Solar Decathlon Competition was a focal point for this class with 26 seniors involved in the design, construction, and execution of *InSite*, the College's 2013 entry in the biennial competition. Three of you were also involved in the creation of *Self-Reliance*, Middlebury's entry in the previous competition. Both of these award-winning, student-driven solar homes are now permanently installed as student housing on the Middlebury campus. And I should note, once again, that Middlebury was and remains the only liberal arts college to have been accepted to compete in this international competition, and its two entries placed in the top eight of the 20 entrants in the competition: all other participants were universities with graduate programs in architecture, engineering, or both. Our students' efforts and success speak volumes about the value of a liberal arts education, its timelessness, as well its evolution. More on this a bit later.

At the recent Dean of the College awards event, six members of the class earned Public Service Leadership Awards, all in recognition of Middlebury's long-standing tradition of fostering student leadership. In fact, community engagement has been a driving force for the Class of 2014. Approximately 65 percent of you gave of yourself to improve the lives of others. Forty-seven seniors served as Community Friends to local children, members of the class strengthened the College's relationship with Special Olympics, and others did significant community service in rural communities as Shepherd Poverty interns.

This is just a sample of the many activities and accomplishments of the Class of 2014. We are enormously proud of all that you have contributed to this community and what you have achieved, personally, during your four years here. I provide this summary at Commencement each year, recognizing that I couldn't possibly include all that one's class accomplished. Needless to say, the Class of 2014 is leaving behind an important legacy to this institution and we thank you.

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The achievements of this class reflect the talents of our students. They also reflect the result of a liberal arts education, or what we might call a "liberal arts plus" education.

Middlebury has provided a rigorous liberal arts education for more than two centuries. Over the course of those two centuries, the College's curriculum has evolved to both retain its liberal arts foundation and to incorporate new pedagogies and fields of study and to meet the evolving needs of our students. The liberal arts, in the term "liberal arts plus," is the foundation of our baccalaureate undergraduate program—a traditional liberal arts curriculum, offering courses in the humanities, the social sciences, the arts, and the natural sciences, including mathematics.

Despite the increased questioning from the public about the value of a college degree in general and a liberal arts education in particular, a liberal arts education remains the very best education over the course of one's lifetime. Unlike a specialized or technical education, which has its virtues, a liberal arts education trains the mind to see things in a myriad of ways that forces one to ask questions and challenge conventions no matter one's "major" course of study. It opens students' minds by introducing them to a broad range of ideas, creative works, and scientific discovery.

At Middlebury, a liberal arts education instills a passion and love of learning—we hope for a lifetime—through the exquisite teaching of our faculty, who cherish the opportunity to share their knowledge of and passion for their subject matter with our students.

More specifically, a liberal arts education inculcates in students the ability to think critically, to analyze deeply, to problem-solve using multiple approaches, and to communicate thoughts clearly in writing and speech. Graduates here today might identify with this description by thinking about Professors Dry and Khalifa, just to name two, and how they conduct their classes in constitutional law and logic. Is there any way one might come out of either of those courses without knowing how to critique a complicated text or how to refute a proof? It might have been a painful process along the way for some, but in the end there is no doubt that students in those courses will have improved their critical thinking, something one will use daily throughout one's life.

Or consider Professor Spatafora in biology, and her insistence on precision and rigor in her classroom and lab. The many students who have studied with Grace and done research in her lab comment consistently years after Middlebury how her discipline and focus provided an exceptionally strong analytical grounding for their careers ranging from biological research to medicine to college teaching...in the humanities.

Or Professors Witkin, Chaplin, Ganiban, Star, or Sfyroeras in the Classics Department as each of them works with students on translations of an ancient text for an entire semester. Their exacting demands on each word and its context, along with

their obvious passion for the material, instills in their students a discipline of the mind and love of learning, the kind one will draw upon in whatever career they choose.

Or, as a final example, through the College's newest major in comparative literature, Professors Graf, Mula, and Wells not only inspire students to delve deeply into literary texts, but they do so in a comparative framework and using non-English languages, while insisting on clarity in their students' communications about those texts and their embedded cultural foundations.

All these are examples of the timelessness and value of a liberal arts education. I could have used quite literally 200 other colleagues as examples in order to underscore our faculty's and the College's commitment to teaching critical thinking, rigorous analysis, problem solving across disciplines, and clear communication skills.

Yet, at the same time, one can argue, and I certainly have, that today's students need more than the enduring aspects of a liberal arts education. Thirty years ago, graduates of the finest liberal arts colleges had their choice of opportunities following Commencement; today, a majority of students find themselves unsure of their post-graduate plans and lacking some of fundamental skills they need to compete with students from around the world when they receive their diplomas.

This newfound competition is the result of significant political, social, scientific, and technological changes over the past two decades that have lowered previous barriers to the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas. All of these changes require of our graduates a new sophistication about multiethnic,

multilingual, and multireligious encounters as they enter the world beyond the protected environment of a liberal arts campus. They also need the opportunity to experiment, to pursue passions that tend to generate further experimentation and exploration, and to test what they have learned in their classrooms in the so-called “real world.”

Fortunately, through the creativity and dedication of some Middlebury faculty and staff, the College provides some exceptional opportunities for our students to build on the foundations of the liberal arts. Some of the opportunities go back many years; many others are new and find a way to complement the core values of our liberal arts roots while also recognizing the needs of students in the 21st century. These include leadership opportunities of student organizations, now numbering more than 150, internships across a wide range of fields and industries, and volunteerism and civic engagement in town, but they also extend to opportunities tied loosely or directly to the academic program. All of these refer to the “plus” in a liberal arts plus education.

For more than a century, students have had the opportunity to learn leadership skills through student organizations. Though there are official faculty or staff advisers for each club, students are more or less on their own, and thereby learn some valuable lessons, some of them to remember for the future, others to forget. For many students, the opportunity to lead organizations has an immediate dividend through the transferring of organization skills they needed to learn to lead their student group to their academic work. Planning, time management, articulating goals, and learning how to be accountable to others are great skills to have after graduation, but they also can help one’s academic life, as many student leaders have claimed.

But the “plus” in liberal arts plus has expanded almost exponentially, if there is a way to measure such things. Student-created and student-led organizations enrich the lives of our community at the same time they offer those in the groups valuable lifelong learning experiences. The Gamut Room has never been as vibrant as it is today, providing a critical space for music, performances, and conversation. Crossroads Cafe, the creation of a group of students three years ago, is another student-run venture that has evolved to meet the preferences of our students, but only after understanding the limitations to what they can adequately manage. In three short years, managing Crossroads presented some truly real-world challenges to its student leaders, such as avoiding bankruptcy, meeting customer rather than management’s preferences, and securing a reliable labor force. The erstwhile Bunker Night Club is yet another student creation, originally hugely popular, but as of now, defunct. Or perhaps it is simply dormant, awaiting a new group of students to learn from the previous group what brought about the Bunker’s demise and to find creative ways to address the problems.

In all of these cases, students gained experience in what it means to lead, to plan, and most importantly to work productively with others, and to learn from those experiences. More than ever, collaboration has become an important ingredient to successful careers. So many of you in this graduating class have led or started new organizations like the three I just mentioned and have benefited from seeing first hand that one needs more than great ideas to succeed. Success requires learning how to rely on others and how best to engage, persuade, and compromise in order to achieve one’s goals. Lessons learned from these opportunities will stay with you no matter what career you choose, and whether you are self-employed or work for others.

Faculty and staff have also played a major role in developing the “plus” in liberal arts plus. Through their leadership, vision, and dedication, Middlebury students can pursue their passions—passions either tied to, or independent of, their academic pursuits. The *Programs on Creativity and Innovation* were launched at the Old Stone Mill along the Otter Creek in town in 2007 with the purpose of inspiring students simply to be creative—to do things they might have always wanted to do, but could not or would not, and to do so in a supportive group setting with 75 or so other students. A student board runs the Old Stone Mill, allocates space to those who have a project they wish to pursue, and the rest is up to the students.

Some of the projects launched in the Old Stone Mill have become long-term initiatives for many of the students. Some have led to for-profit and not-for-profit ventures. Other projects have formed the basis of students’ senior work or independent projects. Most, including those that lead to nothing beyond the creative work itself, serve to uncover and nurture the passion and creative spirit that might otherwise never have surfaced. This kind of experimenting outside of the classroom has made many students better liberal arts students *inside* the classroom. Some faculty have acknowledged that experimentation outside of class builds a confidence and a new boldness that students bring to class—challenging conventions, questioning the faculty member, pushing fellow students, and elevating the overall engagement of the student body.

The theatre department faculty, much like our natural science faculty, have long viewed their role as blending the traditional liberal arts curriculum with “real world” applications. In their case, in addition to teaching acting, they also teach

the history, politics, culture, and other material related to the particular play they or their students will be directing in a given semester. In addition, each summer, they have made possible for about 10-15 Middlebury students to work alongside professional actors in the PTP/NYC Company in New York City. This is a unique opportunity for undergraduate theater students and provides a truly “real world” view of professional theater. Whether or not our theater majors become professional actors is incidental to what they learn from this opportunity.

Our scientists have long provided exceptional opportunities for students to apply what they learn in the classroom to a larger context in their faculty research labs. These experiences, mostly supported by external grant funding, are essential to our students’ learning about how science is done and allows students to test whether they wish to pursue a career in that world following graduation. Last year, three faculty members, a physicist, mathematician, and geneticist (sounds like the beginning of a joke)—Noah Graham, Frank Swenton, and Jeremy Ward—initiated a pilot program that complements the traditional model of students assisting faculty in their research labs.

Like the Solar Decathlon project, the STEM pilot project (which stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) gives our students the opportunity to integrate rigorous classroom work with a practical outcome requiring greater time and scope than a semester of classroom work would allow. Unlike the Solar Decathlon, where the objectives and standards of excellence of the project are defined externally, the STEM project requires students themselves, with guidance from their faculty mentors, to define the project that is worth pursuing.

In the first year of the project, the three mentors challenged 10 students to choose a STEM problem and then to work collaboratively to “solve” it. The project began as an intensive winter term course followed by informal meetings during spring term and then eight weeks of summer work on campus. The students developed a genetic detector for hazardous and carcinogenic aromatic hydrocarbons in drinking water, which would allow Vermonters—many of whom still draw water from wells—to test their water supply at home at a reasonable cost. The project required the team of students to solve a variety of scientific problems. An important outcome of the project, beyond the device they successfully fabricated, was the understanding that most projects of this sort require multi-disciplinary, collaborative work that encourages the cross-fertilization of knowledge and ideas. Now in its second year, the project is yet another example of innovative student work that reflects a level of boldness and the pursuit of one’s intellectual curiosity that is supported by the liberal arts plus curriculum.

My final example of a liberal arts plus program that comes out of the academic program is the Museum Assistants’ Program, or MAP. This program, housed in the College’s museum, expands opportunities for students with a passion for the arts and who wish to acquire the skills associated with working in the world of art and museums.

Through MAP, students from all majors learn how to lead gallery and exhibition tours for fellow students, faculty and staff, local school groups, and the community at large. Weekly workshops run by the museum’s curator of education provide students with the theoretical underpinnings and practical tools for leading discussions in front of works of art for a broad range of audiences. Through this program, MAP docents learn to analyze works of art, communicate non-verbal

information, and hone their public speaking skills—thus making the College museum the largest classroom on campus. MAP is another excellent example of how we can link our liberal arts curriculum to the larger world and provide students with the know-how that will serve them in many careers.

Many of you graduating tomorrow have built upon your classroom experiences and learned to test out and apply what you learned to so-called “real world” situations. You have taken advantage of experiential learning opportunities through valuable internships; by proposing a compelling way to advance peace anywhere in the world and then dedicating a summer to applying your skills, knowledge, and passion to make that project a success; by studying social entrepreneurship and then designing projects with the support of our Center for Social Entrepreneurship to tackle longstanding social problems through new approaches anywhere in the world; by designing and then building a solar-powered house to help advance our understanding and use of renewable energies; by working through previously unstudied archival materials, like diaries and postcards written by Russian veterans of WWII, to immediately put to work the knowledge and historical analysis skills you were acquiring in class to enable for all of us a deeper understanding of a transformational period in modern European history.

Each of you, in some ways obvious, in other ways more subtle, has begun the process, as part of your undergraduate education, of navigating through the joys and challenges of learning by experimentation. Think about it. Which classes would you say demanded the most from your experimental talents? More generally, which aspects of your student experience here relied most on the patience,

thoughtfulness, collaboration, and perseverance that experiential learning really requires?

I really do believe that the opportunity to experiment at a very high level of educational rigor and expectations of excellence, as an undergraduate, is critically important for one's post-college pursuits—more now than ever before. And the key is that not all such opportunities result in success, of course. Indeed, maybe it is the experience of failure, guided by wise mentors, and supported by a relentless commitment to taking advantage of its lessons, that is such an important component of the best possible undergraduate education.

Members of the Class of 2014: we wish you well as you prepare for the next stage of your lives. May each of you draw great confidence from what you accomplished during your time here and appreciate how well you are prepared to meet the challenges our increasingly complex world will present to you and future generations.