

First Year Convocation
September 8, 2013
President Ronald D. Liebowitz

Welcome Class of 2017!

For nine years, I have enjoyed welcoming first-year classes to this magnificent campus and academic institution. In this, my tenth year as president, the routine of providing presidential advice to each class feels somewhat stale.

Don't get me wrong! Of course I gave excellent and perhaps even brilliant advice to the past nine first-year classes: ten bullet points of presidential wisdom, backed up with real examples and hard data. After all this is college!

But at this point in your brief Middlebury experience, while no doubt exhilarated from your week of orientation and MiddView outings, you are probably approaching a state of mental if not physical exhaustion. Twenty minutes of advice, coming now, the day before classes begin, is unlikely to stick, no matter how brilliant. Besides, I am confident that your first-year seminar advisers, the faculty in the three other courses you will take this semester, your Commons Head, your Commons Dean, your JC, RHA, and others you will meet in the coming weeks of this your first semester, will provide enough "advice" to allow me to spare you yet another list of things you should think about as you begin your Middlebury experience.

Instead, I thought I would project ahead—provide you with what I predict is almost sure to happen three years from now when you are all seniors. Very happy seniors, I hope, but also opinionated critical thinkers, who will develop very strong views on many things, including their college, and what they think it had become in three short years.

My wife Jessica and I host numerous student lunches each year at the president's house. It has become both predictable and by now almost an inside joke when we host seniors during their final semester on campus. We hear the same message at virtually all the senior lunches, which is the same message I have heard consistently for the twenty-nine years I have been here on the faculty:

- “Middlebury has “changed so much” since my first year
- First-years are smarter than we were; they are more serious academically; they are too focused
- The place is not as fun as it used to be, largely because we are assigned so much more work than before; And finally
- We would never get into Middlebury today.”

These comments reflect an obvious fear by those seniors, who worry that their beloved Middlebury is well on its way to becoming unrecognizable to them, if it has not gotten there already.

It might seem very odd to hear someone talk about what you are likely to think three-and-half years from now, especially when you have yet to have your first class (aside from your first-year seminar meetings). And so perhaps you should treat this like some kind of advanced warning, an attempt on my part to assure you that what many, if not all of you, will be thinking is no different from what seniors before you have been saying for many, many years, and in fact decades.

I am not saying that Middlebury will not change in the next three or four years, because we all know it will. Pressure and innovation from both inside and outside the academy will lead to changes we probably never considered just five or ten years ago. Even with such changes, the core of this place, what makes Middlebury what it is, will, for sure, endure well beyond the four years that you are here.

That is not to say I haven't been somewhat puzzled by the rather confounding and remarkably consistent observations by seniors. I have. And I have therefore given great thought to why we hear these comments and concerns of our seniors year after year. Could these observations be true? Could so many successive groups of seniors have really experienced such noticeable change in three short years?

It took an observation by my wife Jessica during one of those lunches at 3 South Street before I could put all this apparent angst about how much Middlebury had changed into a

meaningful context. Jessica's fresher perspective on the College didn't hurt either: having been at the College since 1984, I have, in many ways, become part of the so-called wallpaper, while Jessica is a relative newcomer.

Upon hearing the seniors state their perennial concerns about Middlebury changing, Jessica's response to the students was instructive and helped me see things in a new light. She said to the students at one of those lunches:

So what if the average SATs of the entering class has increased noticeably over the years; the world is getting more competitive and so are the best colleges. And so what if first-year students work hard; we all know intro courses require more foundational work than advanced courses, especially with all the new technology and increased access to materials that were never before assignable. And, of course, broad social demographic changes in society, both nationally and globally, have made institutions like Middlebury more diverse. But these changes, plus whatever else you have identified as changes here, are nowhere near powerful enough to change the essence of this place. This is a liberal arts college in remote, beautiful, hard-scrabble, non-sectarian Vermont. These characteristics will always define the imprint that this institution has on all those who pass through it, no matter how much else changes over time. They are far more powerful than any class, generation, or multiple generations of students.

Jessica's comments resonated deeply with me, perhaps because I should have seen this all along, but hadn't. I know it resonated strongly with the students that day at lunch, too.

And why might Jessica have been right in how she described the fundamental characteristics of this institution being so strong that short-term fads or even longer-term societal changes could not erode what is the essence and spirit of this College? As a geographer, it is easy and quite predictable to agree with Jessica...that it is the place itself—the physical environment—that is responsible for exerting the greatest and most durable influence on each of you. The poet Wallace Stevens was so right when he wrote: “His soil is man's intelligence.” We learn from our environment, our environment shapes our experiences, and there is no doubt that the physical beauty of the Champlain Valley plays some role in what we learn and take from our time here.

But there is more to it than the sheer beauty of the place. The hardy and variable Vermont climate, part of Stevens' metaphorical "soil," along with the College's remote location, creates the kind of environment in which friendships and personal relationships form more naturally, and become more meaningful and more long-lasting than in most other settings. There are few distractions in this beautiful, sparsely populated part of New England, which means students who come to study at Middlebury must rely heavily on one another for their social, intellectual, creative, and academic experiences. Though one of the great benefits of being at a place like this is the opportunity for students to get involved and draw great experience from volunteering or working in town, in Addison County, and even in Montpelier, our state capital, living and learning at Middlebury revolves around being part of a strong and tightly knit intellectual community.

And this intellectual community isn't recreated from scratch each year, or every four years, as it may seem to be when one arrives...or more likely when one is a senior about to graduate. Rather, it has roots that extend well beyond a student's four-year perspective. It is the product of 213 years of history, shaped most prominently by an ethic and culture that dates back to its founding, rooted in making the best use of resources available and a necessary spirit built on optimism, collaboration, and pride.

Gamaliel Painter, whose cane I put in circulation at the beginning of Convocation, was a leading force behind the establishment of this College. He could barely read and write, yet he was wise to the world and had a remarkable ability to master whatever kind of work he needed to get something done: he was a self-starter in the true sense of the word. He was a successful businessman, skilled negotiator, bold entrepreneur, and a farmer, and was always looking out for this town and its future.

Germane to us here this evening, and to our College, Painter and his brother purchased land on speculation just east of the Otter Creek during a chance trip to the region in 1763. A decade later, newly married, he and his wife left their native Connecticut and moved to Middlebury to take their chances on a new life. When Painter moved to Middlebury, the

population numbered fewer than 200, which is less than the number of first-years who live in Battell.

Painter, largely uneducated, saw the need for his children and other children in the growing town to obtain a better education than what was then available in and around Middlebury. He began negotiations with representatives of the state to establish a grammar school, or what he called a central academy, to supplement the local district school, which sat along the falls on the site that today houses American Flatbread Pizza. In 1797, with the help and cooperation of several prominent Middlebury families, Painter purchased land on the west side of the Otter Creek where Twilight Hall stands today, and acquired a state charter to begin a grammar school.

A year later, in the fall of 1798, Timothy Dwight, then president of Yale and New England's most respected educator, visited Middlebury. The Yale president was in Vermont to complete research on the economic geography of the region, but also to enjoy Vermont's wondrous natural environment. The trustees of the new grammar school, and Painter in particular, believed strongly that if Middlebury was to become a prosperous town, and the greater Champlain Valley was to become a viable economic region, both would need an institution of higher learning. Gaining the support of someone of Timothy Dwight's stature was critical.

Painter and the grammar school trustees wined and dined President Dwight during his visit to Middlebury. They asked Samuel Miller, who ran Middlebury's finest inn, to host what was later described as the fanciest prepared meal anyone had ever witnessed in town. They treated their guest to Miller's finest liqueurs and by the end of the dinner, and it didn't matter who was drunk and who was still sober, the hosts had secured President Dwight's support for the project.

Soon after the Dwight dinner, Painter began his lobbying efforts with the Vermont legislature to gain permission to establish his college in Middlebury. He called upon many in the local community join the cause, highlighting how all would benefit with the addition of an

institution of higher learning in town. His proposal failed to make the state assembly's agenda in two successive legislative sessions—the 1798 and 1799 gatherings—but though irritated and impatient, Painter persevered. He gained support for his cause from a significant portion of the town population, and as a way to pressure the legislators to consider his request in 1800, he offered Middlebury, with its spanking new court house, to play host to that year's legislative session.

Much to Painter's delight, his offer was accepted. During the three-week legislative session, Middlebury citizens, merchants, and especially tavern owners gave the visiting legislators the red carpet treatment, hoping to win the much sought-after charter. Despite the significant and even hostile protests from the 20 representatives from Burlington and Chittenden County, where a university charter had been awarded nine years earlier but no classes had yet begun, the assembly approved Painter's petition, and officially granted a charter on November 1, 1800 and our College was born.

It was a true team effort that won the College's charter, with a good portion of the town's population joining Painter and other prominent citizens in the cause. And because it quite literally took a village to secure the charter, this particular village, the College took on the moniker of "the Town's College" from its beginning.

Painter and his colleagues—all New England Puritans, and most of them educated at Yale—donated \$4,150 to construct the first college building on the site of present-day Twilight Hall, where earlier Painter had started his grammar school. Like most of its peers in New England, the College struggled financially in the early part of the century. In 1819, however, when Painter died, he left the College a bequest of \$13,000, a huge sum of money at the time, which secured the College's future. And that future—the past 194 years—saw this improbable institution of higher education, founded in a remote town with a population of fewer than 400, evolve into a liberal arts college of distinction. In addition to the \$13,000, Painter also left his cane, which has become an important symbol of the College. A replica of the cane is presented to each graduating student at Commencement.

I provide this history so you can appreciate the remarkable path this College—your college—has taken over its 213 year history, and so you can better understand Jessica’s point about the institution being larger than any one, two, or even fifty generations of students. The College was able to survive and thrive as it did because it forged a powerful identity and understanding of itself that has been passed on from generation to generation of students, extending now to all of you. It established, early on, an ethic of using to maximum advantage whatever physical and human resources it had at its disposal, which were quite limited compared to so many other colleges and universities located in more densely populated and developed regions.

Over the next four years you will witness firsthand how this ethic has endured over two centuries. Parents, perhaps surprisingly, seem to see the results most clearly. While traveling on College business, I hear from parents, unsolicited, over and over how the friends of their sons or daughters who attend Middlebury, compared with the friends of their sons and daughters who attend any and all other schools, are the most interesting, friendly, engaging, civil, and well-rounded kids they have ever met. [Now there is some pressure for you!]

What parents are observing is no accident, and it is not wholly, or even largely, a function of self-selection—that students of a particular personality choose to attend Middlebury. Rather, it is the powerful influence that the institution exerts on its students over their four years here, and it explains, in part, why graduating seniors, year after year, seem to think the incoming first-years are smarter, more serious, more narrowly focused, and, well, different than they are. Odds are, when most first-years enter Middlebury, much of this is true. But it is also true that by the time these first-years, who supposedly represent a rapidly and forever changing Middlebury to the graduating seniors, become seniors themselves, they will be, as Jessica pointed out, shaped and changed significantly by this College...so much so that they will sound very much like today’s seniors and will spend significant time lamenting the changes they see in first-year students and their College.

Why, then, weren’t Jessica’s observations more apparent to me and others long ago? Why hadn’t I noticed, amid all that has changed in my nearly three decades here, the unchanging

characteristics of this College that make it a truly exceptional place for learning and personal growth? I suspect many of those who are so focused on the College's pursuit of academic excellence miss some of the institution's more subtle, yet enduring and defining qualities. Or, more likely, we have taken them for granted.

And so you have now been forewarned. As you begin your Middlebury education tomorrow, please don't get overly worried or concerned about how, in three short years when you are seniors, the first-year students will be much smarter than you are now, they will be working so much harder than you, or that you would never get into Middlebury.

Think, instead, about how much smarter and more accomplished you will be in four years, thanks, especially, to the exceptional faculty with whom you will study. Nowhere will you find a more dedicated faculty that is willing to help you get the most out of your four years here than the one you will meet in class beginning tomorrow. When you do graduate, you will take with you the subject matter you will master by studying deeply within your chosen major; the critical skills you will hone by studying a wide range of subjects through different modes of inquiry; and a passion for life-long learning that a liberal arts education ignites in so many.

And lastly, I encourage you, and really urge you, to be conscious of the less evident yet hugely consequential gift this College offers you that will serve you well throughout your lives: the spirit, confidence, and know-how to bring the best out of the people around you...the ability to collaborate and work well with others...to create a special kind of intellectual and learning community that will nurture you for four years as it has nurtured before you 25,000 Middlebury alumni over the past 213 years. Don't take this special attribute of Middlebury for granted; in fact, make sure to take advantage of it.

Welcome class of 2017, and good luck.