LIBERAL ARTS TOPOLOGY

Chapter 3

Main Points:

-Liberal Arts colleges have a number of unique characteristics (and combinations of characteristics) that distinguish them from other institutions. Some of these are (or are presented as):

-Environmental: residential college, small campus, suburban or rural, comfortable and beautiful, total institution, "bubble" effect, emphasis on community.

-Educational: "liberal" education, relaxed curricular requirements, encouragement (expectation) of diverse study, four years, generally high quality of education.

-Social: Accepting (liberally-minded), close-knit, fun.

-Demographic: (Upper) middle class, white.

-Financial: Expensive.

-Experiential: Transformative, enlightening.

-Professional: A degree that provides numerous career options.

-Status: Degree as identifier of status and class, provider of (upwards) social mobility.

-Liberal Arts college applicants, too, have general characteristics:

-Racial: White.

-Wealth: Upper middle class.

-Education: High school grads, often prep schooled, (seemingly) intelligent and interested, engageable.

-Status: Undergrad degree as a right of passage (for those within high status group), and as a means to greater status for those below (first gen grads).

-Wealth: Undergrad degree as necessary to maintain middle-class wealth (or rise), or to gain middle-class wealth (for those below it).

-Educational/Professional Interests: More often than not applicants are indecisive (they don't know what they want to do in life—liberal arts degree a way of delaying, and making, choice), degree seen as flexible enough to allow students many options even after college (the truth of this is dubious though, increasingly so).

-Personal Interests: Seeking a transformative experience, a social (fun!) experience, looking for friends for life.

-Parent who attended.

There are a number of characteristics that distinguish Liberal Arts colleges from other institutions of higher education, and while few (perhaps no) schools will attain or include all of them, there is a clear "ideal type" of these colleges that we can define.

Some of these characteristics, such as the liberal curriculum and intimate social atmosphere, constitute the majority of the attractive rhetoric that admissions (and alumni) departments employ to attract students and donations, while other characteristics, such as the relative isolation of the campus from the surrounding community, are often hidden, ignored, or spun as positive elements – we will address both kinds of characteristics here, and briefly sketch where they come from.

The students who apply to liberal arts colleges also have distinct characteristics that distinguish them from, say, students who apply to professional schools, large state universities, and from students who do no apply to college. Again, we will deal with an ideal type, whose characteristics not always be shared by every applicant, but more frequently than not, will. These characteristics also differ in how obvious (or hidden) they are, and how colleges and students discuss and deal with them – the upper middle class status of the majority of liberal arts students, for example, is never explicitly discussed in school rhetoric. However, student culture and social stratification is largely shaped around differences of wealth, and students are well aware of the stigmas attached to being identified as a student of a lesser class.

A great percentage of this book will deal specifically to how student (campus) culture is shaped by the various characteristics of the college and of the entering students themselves, and how, in turn, this culture shapes the students and the campus as a whole. As such, we must first turn to what kind of institution and school a Liberal Arts college is, and what kinds of students apply, are admitted, and enroll there.

Characteristics of Liberal Arts Colleges

The basic characteristics of an ideal liberal arts college are relatively well-known, and so we will spend little time laying them out, but will do so according to the loose categories of similarity of their characteristics.

Liberal Arts colleges are typically small in population compared, with student bodies often around 2,000 students – significantly greater or fewer students than this can have substantial effects on the culture of the school.

> The one thing that I noticed right off the bat was the tight knit community of the Hamilton campus. There are only 1,700 kids here, so everyone knew everyone. The person that I roomed with, we'd just be walking around like through the campus, and he would say hi to just about everyone that we passed, just because everyone knew everyone, not maybe not as best friends but indirectly through classes or something. I mean they just kind of all knew each other. I thought that was really nice. [Frank 01-02]

Correspondingly, the size of the campus (which is almost always centralized and exclusive) is often relatively small, though the practical campus size (including outlying areas inhabited by students that may not formally be in the campus) might be twice the size depending on how contained the campus housing is. Generally, Liberal Arts

colleges are pedestrian, and so can never exceed a size reasonable for individuals to traverse a number of times per day. Related to this, Liberal Arts colleges are *residential* – students live nearby to where they work, recreate, study, party, and participate in other activities. Students' basic needs are all met on campus, and the demands of the students' academic and social lives normally mean that students spend the vast majority of their time on the campus, which is intentionally designed as a kind of *total institution* to accommodate the ever-present student population.

In the same way that students devote themselves spatially to the college, they spend a great deal of time there – four years, for typically eight months per year, with the majority if not all of each day spent on campus.

While the specifics of the education Liberal Arts schools provide may vary greatly, they all tend to fall within certain boundaries. The education is "liberal," which typically means that the curricular requirements on students are relaxed, and students are either required or encouraged to take classes in a variety of fields before they graduate, though they will focus in one and end up taking about a third to a quarter of their coursework in it. Correspondingly, courses in a wide variety of study are offered, often with the option of self-designed and/or interdisciplinary concentrations for students who can't find exactly what they are looking for in the regular curriculum.

While (arguably) the quality of the education will vary widely from college to college, the majority of Liberal Arts colleges are recognized as providing a very good

education. Colleges often city their high faculty-student ratios as a way of indicating the social and intimate nature of the education, with the general assumption underlying all of this that the greater individual attention to a student, the better. Indeed, liberal arts colleges often have the best faculty-student ratios amongst all colleges. As a consequence of the perceived high level of education (and corresponding difficulty and demand of the work students have to go through), it is generally thought that job applicants with liberal arts degrees are often well received by employers. The validity of this perception is questionable, however – the comparative market value of a liberal arts graduate has declined in the same way as all graduates of undergrad colleges have, and perhaps more so than other types of schools. Nevertheless, the liberal arts degree certainly still has a great deal of objective value, in no small part due to the perceived high quality of the liberal arts education.

The demographics of Liberal Arts colleges can vary widely between institutions, but the common notion that the majority of students who enroll are middle-class and white still has merit, though it is also true liberal arts colleges have undergone significant diversification (relative to their history) in the past few decades. [other demographic info – could say a lot here, but we may not need to] **Dan: how much can we assume of the reader?]**

Directly related (causally) to the class of the typical student is the expense of the college. Liberal Arts colleges have some of the highest tuitions in America, and are growing at rates commensurate with the general increases in education costs. Obviously, the extreme expense has a direct effect on what kind of students will apply, and despite

the increasing availability of financial aid, many students from families without great financial resources will simply exclude expensive colleges from their list. Consequentially, students of typically poorer ethnic or racial groups will be less likely to apply to such schools, simply because of their financial status.[1] Such self-selection issues will be detailed further below. [more characteristics? We could go on and on...]

Characteristics of Typical Liberal Arts Students

Liberal Arts college applicants, too, have typical characteristics, which is a major reason for the homogeneity of student culture both within and between colleges. Again, not every student will match the ideal type we are describing, but the majority of students will, per variable, match.[2]

As stated, Liberal Arts colleges continue to consist of mostly white, and mostly middle class (especially upper-middle class) students – both largely due to the extreme expense of the education, though other reasons abound. Many other educational characteristics are related directly to these two. Far more students will be high school graduates than of the general population, and far more will have attended private schools and prep schools.

[1] Though there may also be non-financial reasons why many of such students do not apply to liberal arts colleges.

[2] When we say "characteristic," we are using the term very loosely, especially when describing how such characteristics promote certain choices (namely, the choice to apply or enroll in a Liberal Arts college) – race, class, interests, and status are all different types of categories (some of them are a part of the student, some a part of the society to which the student belongs), and have different types of effects on a students' decisions.

Some characteristics of the personality and abilities of the student are also important (and are probably a direct consequence of the student having been raised in an upper middle class household, and being given an excellent pre-college education) – again, many of these may be quite obvious, but it is important to remember that a liberal arts college is, compared to other institutions, quite a unique and remarkable place, and this is largely due to the fact that certain types of people simply do not self-select (or are not selected) to attend. Liberal arts students typically either have an interest in academics and/or are able to do a good deal of academic work relatively well, and are familiar with the basics of a variety of academic topics such as mathematics, science, history, literature, and language. At the very least, they need to *appear* to have all of these characteristics to get into the school – success is another matter.

Again, related to their upbringing, a typical student will view their undergraduate degree as both a rite of passage, and as a gateway to personal success, at very least in terms of status and wealth. The degree is, in this regard, a *means* for the student, and one that is not just necessary, but expected of them. Indeed, not attending undergraduate college is unthinkable amongst the upper middle classes, and pre-college education (for some, even from pre-school!) is geared towards attaining a higher education. This does not, of course, determine what *type* of school the student will attend, but does differentiate them from the majority of the general population, for whom an undergraduate degree is not as much a taken for granted part of life.

It is important to note here that, for the many (though probably not majority of) students at a liberal arts college who do not belong to the upper middle class, an undergraduate degree is a means of social mobility – a way for the student to attain status and class above that of their parents.[3] It is likely that a great deal of class and status tension between students (probably at any college) emerges from or through these different attitudes towards their education.

Up to this point, all the characteristics of an ideal type of liberal arts student we have listed are similar to those you would find at any elite college. Liberal Arts students, however, seem to want two things out of their college experience that they feel they probably would not have gotten elsewhere.

First, Liberal Arts students want an intimate college experience, one in which they will not be drowned out in the masses of other student voices, nor where they will simply mix into the crowd of thousands. Related to this, they desire some degree of isolation or seclusion – though students complain about being far from cities, they also confessed that they wanted the feeling of a tight-knit community that can only come from the centralization of the community, and its separation from the surrounding area. Students regularly made such statements as:

3 On a side note, though the value of the undergraduate education is decreasing (and hence, its ability to provide upwards mobility probably is too), it is unclear whether the increased availability of higher education to poorer families will trigger a shift in their corresponding attitudes towards higher education. In other words, it is not clear if middle and lower-middle classes will, to the same degree as the upper-middle class does now, expect their children to attain an undergraduate degree, and even take it for granted.

> I don't like having everything spread out. I really need a close community for me. I don't want to be trudging up a half-mile hill to get to class, I like having everything really close together. It feels more like a community when things are together. [Sarah 01-02]

> The best things, I think Hamilton's size is definitely a very big asset to the school in that it's so small and you can really get to know everyone. You get to know your professors, and you can go to their houses, and you can go to their offices all the time. I think that's really a huge part of the school. The worst thing I think is its size too. Like its just people become, you get limited by the amount of diversity on campus, and it's very easy to form cliques. It's a paradox. Its size is it's biggest asset and greatest downfall. [Harry Potter 01-02]

In large universities and city and state schools, the student becomes "lost," as the size of the institution drowns out the individual, while at the same time it prevents professors from being able to engage their students closely:

> I didn't really want to be a number, and I wanted to have better interactions with professors. I didn't want to be taught by a TA... I just figured that I would probably feel more comfortable in a smaller environment. [Liz 01-02]

S: My parents were very against me going to a big school because they both went SUNY Albany and they were very against the "factory education".

I: By factory like education, you mean?

S: Enormous lecture rooms with teachers who will never know your name, and then your seat number maybe.

I: What does liberal arts mean to you then?

S: It means that I can concentrate on what I want to concentrate: history, sociology, [and do] all that kind of stuff that I care about without having to solve Calculus equations. [Sasha Smith 01-02]

Students mention a variety of social reasons for choosing liberal arts colleges, and nearly all of them can be reduced to the notion of a close community where most people know, or "sorta know" everyone, and where students can engage professors and each other on a one-to-one basis easily and comfortably.

Second, Liberal Arts students want a curriculum that doesn't force them to decide on their life course (at least, not yet). Few students, upon their last year of high school, know exactly what they want to do with the rest of their lives, and so a school with a relaxed, open, broad curriculum, that offers a flexible degree that will be appreciated by a variety of types of employers is extremely attractive. Examples from students abound.

I can keep my options open, have a lot of choices, and that there's a lot of like different paths I could take, and it doesn't like restrict me from doing like what I want to do. [Katie 02-03]

I don't like the idea of like core curriculum, so the fact that they want to narrow it down, that's basically very attractive. [James 01-02]

I have teachers who also graduated from schools like this. They said you learn everything at a liberal arts college, and you might go to business school and not even like business school, and you're stuck there for four years. I can always, you know, change my major at the last minute. Right now, I'm learning a little bit of everything. [John 01-02]

I applied to a lot of liberal arts schools because like just because like it seems like people are switching jobs so much these days, it's probably better like to know a lot about like everything instead of like being really concentrated in one subject. [Anne 01-02]

[Liberal Arts schools are] kind of open, you know, like one of the things that discouraged me from applying to any larger schools was having to apply to a specific school within a university. Like you'd have to apply to the, I don't know, I don't know how it really works but if say there's a large university, you have to apply to a certain section of it. Maybe you'll

get in, and maybe you won't. If you want to maybe change your major, you'd have to transfer into a different school within the university. Liberal arts was good because it afforded the opportunity to, you know, try a lot of different things before I had to declare what I wanted to do. [Frank 01-02]

Well, like just a chance to study everything, like anything. Like even while you make, like I have a friend at Syracuse who's in the architecture program. She's not taking anything but architecture. She's in the architecture school for five years, and she lives in the studio. Like she doesn't like, you know, take anything else. And here, I mean I'm taking everything under the sun, like I took Anthropology. I didn't even know what that was when I took it. [Susie Johnston 01-02]

S: I wanted to go to liberal arts because I had no idea what I wanted to major in. And so I was just leaving my options open.

I: Okay. And so if you were going to think about how you would explain it, or how you would categorize liberal arts, or define it, like how would you explain that?

S: I guess it would be an education program that allows you to take classes in every, and any, department that you want, and focus on something later in your school and career where you don't have to decide in the beginning. [Carrie 01-02]

Despite the fact that, as many students recognize, being a jack of all trades might make them a master of none, students do not yet feel prepared enough to make such large decisions, and a liberal arts education provides them with a way to defer their decision and explore a variety of fields, both in and beyond college.

Effects of the Characteristics of Liberal Arts Colleges and Students

While the degree of uniformity amongst students will vary widely by college, and the characteristics of colleges will too vary widely, there is still a significant amount of homogeneity between and within Liberal Arts colleges – far more so than most state schools, and probably more so than in the elite, large universities.

The internal homogeneity of colleges, and deviations from it, have a profound and direct effect on the culture and academics of the school. To some degree, the culture of these schools mirror the status and class struggles of American society, though the specific ways in which these issues play out are unique, often unique to specific institutions. Class and status struggles lie behind issues such as society membership, academic achievement, and the voluntary segregation by race, ethnicity, and class that has become so familiar in school cafeterias at every level of education.

Students don't come to college with a blank slate. They are already made – they have particular backgrounds, likes, dislikes, and habits. Much of the social, extracurricular, and even academic behavior we see out of students, especially in the first few months after high school, is an attempt to organize themselves in some way that fits with the social and institutional world they have entered. We now turn to the first steps students take to do this – their initial experiences with students and the campus, both before and at the start of college.