Learning Social Responsibility or Protecting the American Nobility?

Understanding the Ideological Context of Middlebury College

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ABSTRACT
This essay examines whether the ideological context of Middlebury College serves to cultivate a commitment to social responsibility and service in its students, as the mission statement of the College suggests. Specifically, this research explores whether Middlebury students emerge with an awareness of and desire to address environmental issues, social injustices and inequalities, and global, systemic problems. Through discourse analysis of the College’s ‘rhetoric of recruitment,’ I construct an understanding of Middlebury’s ideology, which I explain as one of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership. In order to determine whether or not the College teaches the lessons it claims to, this data is supplemented with content analysis of five interviews with Middlebury College seniors, and an analysis of Middlebury graduates’ career choices. I conclude that the College fails to make good on its commitment to social responsibility and service. Instead, the meritocratic ideals of the institution promote an ideology of individualism, in which hard work, personal success, and competition in pursuit of any goal trumps a commitment to working in pursuit of the common good. Institutional ideologies shape individual ideologies, and I suggest that the overwhelming majority of Middlebury students choose not to ‘care’ about working to make the world a better place as a result of the ways in which the institution shapes their choices. Rather than inspiring a commitment to social responsibility and service, I conclude that Middlebury College reinforces the status quo, bestowing additional privileges upon the elite and furthering social and economic inequity.
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INTRODUCTION

Liberal arts colleges are often lauded for the work they do to shape young adults into well-rounded, engaged global citizens. Most liberal arts institutions proclaim a willingness to ask the “hard questions” and engage with challenging economic, social, and environmental issues. We are told that the holistic approach of a liberal arts education enables students to become young agents of change by equipping them with diverse skills and perspectives. One might hope that, after graduation, many of these innovative, young intellectuals will venture forth to address our most pressing global challenges.

Over the years, many schools have made official their commitment to global engagement. In 1993, the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), an association of over 700 independent colleges and universities, introduced the “Serving to Learn, Learning to Serve Project.” The initiative was meant to formalize the opportunities for liberal arts colleges and universities to develop programs linking “service with learning to create a congruent service ethic throughout the campus culture” (Sigmon 1997). While Middlebury College is not a member of the CIC, the mission of the College suggests that it too sees the unification of service and learning as an important purpose of education. On the Middlebury website, the College clearly articulates that its students “should be independent thinkers, committed to service, with the courage to follow their convictions and to accept responsibility for their actions.” For many, the liberal arts and service seem to have become inextricably linked.

I wish to challenge the idea that such institutions truly teach the importance of social responsibility and service. An elite, liberal arts institution committed to the common good
is certainly a morally attractive ideal. However, I suggest that the ideological context of many such institutions does not always serve to cultivate a life-long commitment to service in their students. Instead, I suggest that the meritocratic ideals of such institutions, where success is understood to be a product of hard work and where hard work is understood to be a success in and of itself, encourage students to focus inward on their own goals and desires, rather than outward on the needs and struggles of those around them. With low acceptance rates and increasing costs, the exclusivity of such institutions may create a space in which privilege is not questioned and class hierarchies are reinforced.

When it came time to pick a topic for my senior Sociology/Anthropology thesis, I felt compelled to write about something of personal importance. After nearly four years at Middlebury, I have come to the discouraging realization that the overwhelming majority of students do not seem to care about making the world a better place for others. But, I have remained perplexed. Why, when Middlebury College appears to espouse a belief in the importance of global engagement and social and environmental responsibility, do more students not wish to use their privilege and top-notch educations for good? Either the students are impressively resisting the lessons the College is trying to teach about social responsibility and service, or the College is not actually trying to teach the lessons it claims to. Thus, I hit upon the topic of my senior thesis.

Before coming to Middlebury, I believed that the compulsion I felt to make the world a better place, to strike down injustice and inequality everywhere, to use privilege for good by giving back, was a compulsion felt by most everyone. I trusted in the inherent altruism of each and every person, steadfast in my belief that, with a bit of education and
exposure, a commitment to giving back could be cultivated in anyone. I came to Middlebury College, as did many others, searching for a community eager to engage in deep contemplation of our own privilege, eager to stamp out every “-ism” in the book, eager to use our education to set all the problems of the world right. Visions of environmental and social activism danced in my head, and I arrived at Middlebury as a bright-eyed, naïve young first-year.

What I found stunned me. It seemed that every new friend I made had twelve years of private school under their belt, five vacation homes scattered around the world, daddy’s credit card in their wallet, and a shiny new car in the parking lot. These were the children of Wall Street and big business and old money, and overnight I went from believing that I was one of the most privileged people in the world to realizing there was another level of privilege, so far above me that I never even knew it was there. But, it was not simply the wealth, power, connections, and Nantucket cottages that had me shocked. What truly astounded me was that so few of these students seemed interested in anything other than replicating these lives of luxury for themselves. They imagined careers in finance, advertising, and corporate consulting. It seemed that they did not wish to consider their privilege. Middlebury College was a picture of the meritocracy at its finest. The bright, hard-working children of the one-percent were there because they had earned it. In contrast, the dining staff were there to cook and clean, custodians were there to scrub toilets and empty trash cans, facilities staff were there to fix damaged dorms and keep the grounds looking like a posh country club – they clearly were not smart enough, committed enough, bright enough, hard-working enough, to be students at a college like Middlebury. The myth of the meritocracy was alive and well, apparently drowning out
any desire to change the world for the better. Of course, a handful of kids were fighting for divestment, calling for recognition of the horrifying frequency of sexual assault on campus, devoting their weekends to migrant justice conferences, calling for better relationships between students and staff. But, the overwhelming majority just did not seem to care.

I aim to examine the ideology put forth by Middlebury College, and the ways students learn and embrace or reject the cultural values, ideas and beliefs embedded within this. I will explore the question of whether the ideological context of Middlebury College serves to cultivate a commitment to service and a desire to be an agent of change in its students, or whether it instead reinforces the status quo, bestowing additional privileges upon the elite and furthering economic disparities. Specifically, I ask whether Middlebury students emerge with an awareness of and desire to address environmental issues, social injustices and inequalities, and systemic problems, or whether they emerge with a desire to preserve or improve their own social status.

Institutional ideologies shape individual ideologies, and the stories of students can help us understand what types of citizens are emerging from Middlebury College. Given the immense amount of economic, intellectual, and social capital invested in an institution like Middlebury, and how difficult it is to gain access to the College, I believe it is vital that we examine the ideological work done by the College and seek to understand its larger social implications. I acknowledge that my research may only offer a glimpse into students’ understandings of the purpose and function of a Middlebury education. However, I hope that my research will offer a fresh critique of the role that liberal arts institutions and ideologies play in creating socially responsible citizens, as
well as the ways in which they allow for the reinforcement of social and economic
inequalities in the United States and the world at large.

METHODS

My research was conducted at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. I used a
multi-pronged approach, drawing heavily on discourse analysis, to construct an
understanding of the ideological context of Middlebury College and to determine if and
how the College teaches its students the importance of service and social responsibility.
To begin, it is important to establish a clear understanding of “ideology.” Here, I use the
term in the classical Marxist sense: a particular collection of principles, held up by a
ruling class, the owners of economic, political, and social capital, and imbued with
immense social power. Ideology is a powerful, structuring force; an ideology exerts
hegemonic power and control over society, and demands that individuals conform to
certain systems of belief and behavior. What makes an ideology so powerful is that it is
not often identifiable as property of the elite. In fact, it is not identifiable as the property
of any single group. The language and principles of the masses are recuperated such that
an ideology appears to work in favor of all people, when really it further consolidates
power in the hands of the elite. The power of ideology comes from its apparent neutrality.
While individuals may question or resist certain elements of an ideology, institutional
support ensures that the underlying cultural values, ideas, beliefs, and principles that
work in favor of the elite become the overarching structure of society. Within the context
of Middlebury College, a particular collection of the principles of the elite, or ideology,
exerts power and control over individuals and structures the social organization of the
College.
It is also necessary that I offer a definition of social responsibility. In the context of my research, individual social responsibility can be understood as a prosocial behavior, any behavior that benefits others or impacts them positively. Scholars suggest that there are four main drivers that contribute, to varying degrees, to the development of a personal ethic of social responsibility; these drivers are intrinsic altruism, material incentives, social pressure, and self-esteem (Benabou and Tirole 2010). Each of us is influenced by these internal and external drivers, and engages, to varying degrees, in socially responsible behavior. To practice individual social responsibility one might pledge to consume only ethically produced products, donate money to charity, or give one’s own time and action to a good cause. While the little things, like giving blood or contributing cans to a food drive, are no doubt important, I seek a more encompassing definition of what it means to live a socially responsible life. Individual social responsibility should be understood as an awareness of and commitment to address environmental issues, social injustices and inequalities, and other entrenched, systemic problems. I suggest that Middlebury’s alleged ideology, to be discussed later, constructs such a definition of social responsibility and implies that this ethic ought to permeate one’s entire life.

I sought out a nuanced depiction of the ideological context of Middlebury College by looking at both the values, goals, and principles advertised by the institution and the lessons and values students reported learning during their time at the College. In order to gauge the importance of service and social responsibility, I complimented an analysis of the College’s rhetoric with an analysis of both the stories of students and Middlebury graduates’ career choices to see if the purported lessons are indeed being taught and learned.
In order to understand the alleged ideology of Middlebury College, I conducted a discourse analysis of the rhetoric used on the College website, in various promotional materials (brochures, videos, pamphlets, etc.), and during campus tours and informational sessions offered by the Admissions Office. I recorded and categorized the ideas, beliefs, values, and goals of the College as depicted in the various texts used in the marketing and advertisement of the College and identified frequently used words, phrases, ideas, and goals. Tracking the things that the College says and the stories it tells about itself allowed me to identify the defining elements of the ideology of Middlebury College.

I supplemented this analysis of the institutional rhetoric with an analysis of the discourse used in personal, one-on-one interviews that I conducted with Middlebury seniors. All of my participants were members of the class of 2013.5, or second-semester seniors who will be graduating in February 2014.¹ I interviewed five Middlebury students. All participants’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity. All five participants started at Middlebury College in February 2010, and will have completed their degrees in four years. Four of my participants were male; one participant was female. Three of my participants identified as “upper middle class,” one as “middle class,” and one as belonging to the “highest tax bracket.” Only one participant will be graduating with student debt.

Three participants will have completed both a major and a minor at Middlebury; two participants completed only a major. My participants represented a variety of majors

¹ Middlebury College accepts one hundred freshmen each year to start school in February and these students, called “Febs,” graduate four years later in a special mid-year celebration. At Middlebury, any student in their final semester before their February graduation is referred to as a “Super Senior Feb” and this is the term used for all of my interviewees.
including two in Economics, two in Environmental Studies (one with a focus in Economics, the other a focus in Policy), and one in International Politics and Economics. My sample reflects trends within the general student body as Economics and Environmental Studies are the two most popular majors at Middlebury, and four of my five participants fall within these two majors.

I found my participants through a snowball sampling approach, starting with one individual and asking each subsequent interviewee for recommendations of whom else to talk to. In total, I spoke with students from three different majors. I successfully identified individuals from within two of Middlebury’s most popular majors: Economics and Environmental Studies. Although it is difficult to define the ideal-typical Middlebury student or Middlebury experience, I hoped that by interviewing students from within the different majors I would be able to reflect the academic experiences of many Middlebury students.

I contacted all potential interviewees via email with a brief description of my project and what the interview would entail. Each interviewee was informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, was assured confidentiality, and was offered compensation in the form of a ten-dollar gift certificate, paid for by the Undergraduate Research Office, if they chose to participate in the interview. Interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and took place either on campus or in town. Each interview was voice-recorded and later transcribed.

My interviews were organized such that I covered three main topic areas: the individual’s personal background, the individual’s experiences at Middlebury, and the individual’s plan for the future. Within each topic area, I posed questions related to
service and social responsibility. While I touched upon all three topics in each interview and attempted to ask the same questions of each participant, I also wanted to ensure that my interviewees felt relaxed and comfortable (see Appendix I for interview questions). Thus, my interviews were somewhat unstructured, and, depending on the individual, the conversations often strayed from the pre-determined interview questions. At certain moments during the interviews, navigating my dual-identity as a researcher and peer was a challenge, and I hope that I have been able to do so in an honest, thoughtful way.

After each interview, I sent each participant an email that thanked them for their participation and included a few follow-up questions (see Appendix II for questions). The questions asked for demographic details, as well as for an explicit statement as to whether or not the individual believes that Middlebury College successfully teaches the importance of service and social responsibility, and whether or not the College should teach this lesson at all.

The career data provided by the Institutional Research (IR) Department of Middlebury College provided a useful quantitative measure of how Middlebury’s ideology structures its students’ values and life choices. I present career data that was collected through IR surveys in 2009 through 2012. I focus on the classes of 2011 and 2012, as I have access to more complete data sets for these two graduation years. The survey was conducted in late spring and many graduates were still looking for employment, 25 percent and 24 percent respectively for the classes of 2011 and 2012. Given this, the data that I will present for 2011 is somewhat incomplete, as we do not know what all the graduates went on to do. For the class of 2012, I will present additional
data collected in the late fall and winter following graduation to give a picture of what graduates were doing six months after graduation.
CHAPTER I: CONTEXTUALIZING MIDDLEBURY

Before I examine the ideological context of Middlebury College and the ways in which students come to understand and act out the values of the institution, it is helpful to contextualize my research in a review of the existing literature. An exploration of the history of the liberal arts and social hierarchy in the United States will help to place Middlebury, and other elite colleges like it, within the larger context of American society, and will illuminate how such institutions can either challenge or reinforce and reproduce social hierarchies. Drawing on various anthropological and sociological theories and studies, I situate my research in a larger body of literature that explores how individuals and institutions interact and how systems of class, power, and privilege affect the choices that individuals makes.

Understanding the Liberal Arts

The first iterations of “college” emerged in the seventeenth century under the direction of the Puritans. The Puritans brought with them a model of “college” inspired by exclusive, thirteenth century English divinity schools which had, by the fifteenth century, evolved to accept younger pupils as boarders as a way of allowing scholars to supplement their earnings (Delbanco 2012). Oxford and Cambridge were born during this time, and of the 20,000 people who immigrated to New England in the 1630s, an estimated 150 people had graduated from one of the two institutions (Delbanco 2012). While not an overwhelming portion of the population, these graduates brought with them the vision and ideologies that would lay the foundation for the great American colleges and universities. While the study of religion was central to these early institutions, students also studied history and philosophy. Delbanco tells us that this was a “tripartite
division of knowledge corresponding roughly to today’s triumvirate of humanities, social
science, and natural sciences” (Delbanco 2012). The purpose of these early institutions
was at once simple, and unbelievably lofty. Drawing on the basic meaning of
“university,” the early American college and university served to facilitate the “gathering
of all knowledge into a unified whole” (Delbanco 2012).

History suggests that elite American colleges openly practiced extreme exclusion,
racism, and anti-Semitism until the 1960s (Delbanco 2012; Soares 2007). Elite
institutions of higher education served as a means of keeping the ‘right’ people in and the
‘wrong’ people out. College was becoming an important marker of social status and
class. C. Wright Mills found that in 1950, 68 percent of the American “very rich” had
gone to college (Mills 1956). In his study, Mills defines the “very rich” as the 275
American men and women that have at least $30 million each (Mills 1956). Of those who
had attended college, half of the “very rich” went to an Ivy League school, and nearly a
third were split between Harvard and Yale. The remainder was spread between Princeton,
Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Pennsylvania, and other colleges such as Amherst,
Brown, Lafayette, Williams, and Bowdoin. Mills’ studies suggest that attendance at the
most prestigious American colleges and universities plays an important role in the
production of the American elite. If, as Mills suggests, American colleges are doing
something more than simply facilitating the “gathering of all knowledge,” what is it that
they do? Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposes that an “educational system is required to
produce individuals who are selected and arranged in a hierarchy once and for all,”
suggesting that educational systems and institutions play a vital role in the production of
social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1979).
Today, higher education in the United States is a multi-billion dollar industry. In 2010, 11.5 million full-time students were enrolled in degree-granting institutions, with approximately 1.8 million of those enrolled in private, liberal arts colleges (Matthews 2013). We are bombarded with concerns over the rising cost of tuition and the crushing experience of student debt combined with a weak job market. A college degree has long been understood as necessary for a successful career, but some people have their doubts about the value of college.

While attitudes towards college have surely changed over the past decade, Richard Hersh’s 1997 national study on perceptions of the value of a liberal arts education offers insight into how people feel about the liberal arts, and what value they see in the broad, interdisciplinary approach of liberal arts institutions. Hersh found that while few people have very positive impressions of liberal arts institutions, those with close connections to liberal arts institutions tend to think highly of such institutions (Hersh 1997). A 2011 Pew Research Center study on higher education found that 57 percent of Americans believe that the higher education system in the United States does not provide good value for the cost; only a quarter of college presidents think the same thing (2011). While the Pew study includes all types of higher education institutions, it supports Hersh’s findings that those with close connections to liberal arts institutions think more highly of them, or find them to be more valuable, than the general public.

Specifically, Hersh found that liberal arts faculty and administrators and recent liberal arts graduates tended to think most highly of the liberal arts, with 59 percent and 84 percent respectively claiming a “very positive impression” (1997). In comparison, only 34 percent of parents and 25 percent of high school students responded with a “very
positive impression” (Hersh 1997). Similarly, the 2011 Pew Research Center study found that while a majority of Americans believe college is not worth the cost, 86 percent of college graduates found it to be a valuable personal investment (2011). These numbers hint at an interesting phenomenon referred to as ‘socializing.’ ‘Socializing,’ which I suggest can be understand as a process of ideological formation, occurs when an individual conforms to an identity that was not originally desired or sought out (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). Based on Hersh’s research it is possible to understand faculty, administrators’, and students’ overwhelmingly positive impression of the liberal arts as a product of socialization. These individuals must merge their beliefs with their new identities as members of a liberal arts institution. In order to reconcile their identities as members of liberal arts institutions with potentially contradictory beliefs, these individuals conform to a certain system of beliefs that says liberal arts institutions are valuable and worthwhile. This ‘socialization’ serves to create social cohesion and to enable the continuance of the liberal arts tradition in the United States.

But what do the liberal arts offer? The 2011 Pew Research Center study found that 73 percent of presidents of the most selective four-year colleges said the main mission of higher education is to foster the personal and intellectual growth of students (Pew Research Center 2011). Presidents of the most selective four-year colleges saw the development of skills to improve student earnings and career-specific training as much less important aspects of higher education’s mission (Pew Research Center 2011). Similarly, Hersh found that parents and business executives (potential employers of college graduates) believe liberal arts colleges are more effective than universities and specialty schools at “developing respect for others,” “developing loyalty and integrity,”
and “developing citizenship” (Hersh 1997). This supports the notion that the liberal arts are about developing the whole individual. Rather than simply giving students practical skills, the liberal arts allows for “character formation and the development of a sense of vocation” and encourages students to ask “the great questions that give meaning to life” (Roche 2010). Thus, it seems that a liberal arts education not only buys an excellent academic experience, but an opportunity to become a certain type of *cultured citizen*. As I will discuss, liberal arts citizenship is not purely one of culture, but also of class and plays a vital role in the reproduction of the elite (Soares 2007; Mills 1956; Bourdieu 1979).

**Meritocracy and the Liberal Arts**

The idea of a meritocracy is so central to the social organization of the United States that many would be surprised to know how new the word actually is. ‘Meritocracy’ was coined by an English social critic named Michael Young in 1958 (Delbanco 2012). Young proposed the term ‘meritocracy’ not to describe an admirable system in which hard work, talent, and intelligence would lead individuals to success and acclaim, but to warn of a frighteningly competitive social system he saw developing, in which the gap between the haves and the have-nots grew ever wider (Delbanco 2012). Central to Young’s ‘meritocracy’ was the existence of elite, educational institutions that bestowed wealth and power upon the talented few who gained access to them (Delbanco 2012). Although Young brought his meritocracy to life in the pages of a dark, futuristic novel, the term ‘meritocracy’ quickly worked its way into mainstream American lexicon and the idea has since become central to the way American social organization is explained.
Whereas Young intended to warn people away from an impending social nightmare, the American elite eagerly embraced the idea of a meritocratic society. A society in which hard work and personal merit were rewarded fit nicely with the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps story of the ‘American Dream.’ The phrase ‘American Dream’ was coined in the 1930s and constructs a narrative that “represents a basic belief in the power and capacity of the individual” (Johnson 2006). Implicit within this belief in the individual is the assumption that society is an egalitarian system that “will allow individuals to advance based on their own merits” (Johnson 2006). Here, it is helpful to turn to the theory of social facts proposed by Emile Durkheim. Durkheim understood there to be a certain set of social phenomena that consist of “manners of acting, thinking, and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him” (Durkheim 1895). Social facts are not biological or psychological, but sociological. In order for a particular way of acting, thinking, or feeling to become a social fact, it must somehow reflect or reinforce the ideals of a social community. When embraced by the majority, the concept becomes an unquestionable aspect of social life. In short, a phenomenon becomes a social fact when it exerts hegemony over the vast majority of society.

Yet, it is the coercive power of a social fact that makes it so fascinating and sociologically important. These phenomena that exist external to individuals have significant power in determining an individuals actions, beliefs, emotions, and choices. It is useful to understand the ‘American Dream’ narrative as a social fact within American society. Harvey suggests that a way of thought must appeal to our “intuitions and instincts, to our values and desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social
world we inhabit,” and the narrative of the ‘American Dream’ does just that (Harvey 2005). The ‘American Dream’ is a story of hope and possibility that appeals to the instinct and desire to make a better life for oneself. But, it is more than a story. The narrative of the ‘American Dream’ tells us how to act, teaching us that hard work leads to success; it tells us how to think, teaching us success or failure is entirely in the hands of the individual; it tells us how to feel, encouraging pride in individual accomplishment, and disdain for the failure of others. The power of the ‘American Dream’ narrative lies in the fact that it is understood not as a story, but as a universal truth, and has very real impacts on the choices and lives of individuals.

Within the frameworks of both the meritocracy and the ‘American Dream’ individuals are understood to be independent actors, drawing on their own rationality, ability, and work ethic in pursuit of personal success. However, by understanding how these ideologies function as social facts we can begin to see how the social facts fail to represent the true social context of the United States. These ideologies leave no room for consideration of the social and cultural frameworks within which individuals function. There is no room for a consideration of structural inequality, institutional racism, or external structures that determine access to social, cultural, and economic capital.

Johnson, a sociologist who has conducted extensive research on the American elite, suggests that this is precisely what makes the myth of the meritocracy so appealing to the elite. The meritocracy and its emphasis on the individual “explains not only how our society works, but how inequality exists” (Johnson 2006). Inequality exists not because of structural inequalities but because some people are incompetent and lazy. Inequality
exists not because unequal access to unearned advantages and privileges but because some people are exceptionally intelligent and hardworking.

I have included this discussion of the meritocracy and the ‘American Dream’ because it is useful to consider how elite liberal arts colleges both benefit from and perpetuate and promote these narratives. Elite, liberal arts colleges are constructed as the ideal meritocratic institutions: those who are qualified gain access and those who are not are eliminated based on their lack of merit. However, it is important to recognize the difference between the ideal and the actual, and in the next section I will draw upon studies and theories concerned with social hierarchy and class in the United States that suggest that access to elite institutions is not purely obtained through merit.

Institutions and Social Hierarchy: The Power Elite

C.W. Mills suggests that there exists in the United States a group of individuals “whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women” (Mills 1956). Mills deems this social group the “power elite” and suggests that what makes this group so powerful is their ability to gain access to and control over institutions (Mills 1956). In the United States, “institutions are the necessary bases of power, of wealth, and of prestige, and at the same time, the chief means of exercising power, of acquiring and retaining wealth, and of cashing in the higher claims of prestige” (Mills 1956). Thus, if individuals gain access to and control over institutions, they become powerful. Mills’ theories are helpful in understanding how power and wealth are allocated and obtained in the United States.

I introduce Mills’ theories of the power elite because it is possible to understand elite colleges as the type of institution Mills claims to be capable of bestowing great
power in the hands of a few individuals. As Mills says, “to be celebrated, to be wealthy, to have power requires access to major institutions” (Mills 1956). Thus, we see how attendance at an elite, liberal arts college, an example of one of Mills’ “major institutions,” could ensure access to power, prestige, and wealth. Theories of the power elite help illuminate the important social work that occurs in the context of elite liberal arts colleges.

But how do individuals gain access to such institutions? Mills suggests that our particular historical path has “led to the rise of an elite of power” (Mills 1956). The model of elite, exclusive colleges brought by the Puritans and graduates of Oxford and Cambridge has continued ever since. During the post-Civil War era, boarding schools were created as a means of separating the true elite from the nouveaux riche, and pathways between boarding school and colleges ensured only the ‘right’ individuals gained access to such elite institutions (Soares 2007). The eugenics movement, a rise in anti-Semitism, segregation and institutionalized racism, and the emergence of qualification measures, like the SAT, all ensured that certain individuals were kept in and others were kept out. Bourdieu’s theory of elimination is helpful for understanding the process through which the “most disadvantaged classes” are left out of a certain category, in this case higher education (Bourdieu 1979). Building upon Bourdieu’s theory of elimination in his research at Yale University, Joseph Soares determined that there was understood to be an “organic connection between family qualities and the attributes of a youth most deserving of Yale’s liberal arts education” (Soares 2007). Thus, we see how disadvantaged populations are eliminated from the hallowed halls of elite educational institutions based on inherited advantages, not merit.
These theories and studies illustrate how the Puritans’ exclusive college model, followed by decades of restrictive policies in the education system, has created a system in which elite colleges aid in the process of social reproduction. Or, as Bourdieu explains it, the process through which social hierarchy is passed on from generation to generation (1979). If, as Mills suggests, elite liberal arts colleges are institutions of the power elite, they can be understood as spaces in which elite culture, ideology, and power are passed on to the next generation of the American ruling class (1956). Yet, within these institutions, the ideologies of the elite are conferred upon all students, regardless of whether one is an elite youth, “most deserving” (Soares 2007), or a rare youth from the “disadvantaged classes” (Bourdieu 1979). Thus, social hierarchies persist, or are reproduced, as the young power elite develops a renewed belief in the ideologies of the elite. But, these ideologies, with their co-opted language and principles of the masses, also resonate with those who do not truly belong in the world of elite education. Whether it is the narrative of the ‘American Dream’ or the meritocracy, these ideologies inspire all students to maintain or improve their social and economic status. There is, of course, more at stake for students who embrace the ideologies of the elite, but do not truly belong. Should they fail to secure a position for themselves among the power elite, they will be forced to return to their original social position, departing with nothing but a glimpse into the lives of the American nobility. Previously, I suggested that liberal arts institutions are understood to create a certain type of *cultured* citizen, and here I suggest they may also create a certain type of *classed* citizen, if not in actual capital, in ideological formation.

**Learning To Do Good: Social Responsibility, Service, and Social Change**
I turn now to a discussion of how individuals develop an ethic of social responsibility, a commitment to service, and a desire to work towards social change. I suggest that the development of a personal ethic of social responsibility and service happens through a process of ideological formation, and is determined by the institutional context one exists within. The following theories not only help us understand why some individuals act as and believe what they do, but also why institutions, like Middlebury College, embrace and promote very particular ideologies of social responsibilities, service, and social change. In many ways, a commitment to social responsibility and service seems to contradict common patterns of social organization and behavior. Social responsibility and service require an outward focus, rather than an inward focus on the self, which does not mesh with many theories of individual behavior and social organization.

First, I turn to the ‘Just World’ hypothesis, which describes one way in which individuals come to understand their social environment and the way the world functions around them. In a ‘Just World,’ everything is “manageable and predictable” and “people ‘get what they deserve’” (Lerner 1980). Much like a belief in the meritocracy, a belief in a ‘Just World’ allows individuals to explain their social status and the status of those around them as right and logical. While Lerner argues that most people are satisfied with the ‘Just World’ hypothesis as an explanation of the way the world works, he also acknowledges that “at one time or another most people have noted and felt the quite disturbing juxtaposition of the greatly discrepant fates which have been dealt people in our world” (Lerner 1980). This suggests that there may be moments in which individuals’ belief in a ‘Just World’ falters.
We must ask, then, what might cause individuals to question their belief in a ‘Just World’? If they do indeed question this belief, what might lead them to want to address the “discrepant fates dealt people in our world” (Lerner 1980)? Bourdieu suggests that exposure to and knowledge of inequality is the first step towards breaking down the false notion of a ‘Just World.’ As Bourdieu puts it, “blindness to social inequalities both obliges and allows one to explain all inequalities, particularly those in educational achievement, as natural inequalities, unequal giftedness” (Bourdieu 1979). He seems to suggest that, in the context of inequality, ignorance is bliss. Thus, it follows that for an individual to develop an ethic of social responsibility or a commitment to service, one must first be exposed to, informed of, and educated about the various forms of inequality that exist within our world.

While Mills would most likely agree with Bourdieu, he challenges the idea that knowledge of inequality will instigate real change. Mills claims that society has accepted a theory of social change that only allows for change within a stable system (Mills 1956). This theory sees change happening through give and take, compromise, and small shifts in the balance of interests within a system. This theory in no way challenges the social structure, but instead addresses superficial problems at the surface of society. But, Mills suggests that the success of this particular theory of social change is due to the fact that “those who profit by the general framework of the status quo can afford more easily than those who are dissatisfied under it to entertain such views as the mechanics of social change” (Mills 1956). Here we see how the rhetoric of social change can be co-opted in pursuit of the interests of the power elite. Those who determine the status quo also appear to determine an acceptable language of social change.
Of course, there are moments in which those that benefit from the status quo may indeed seek to challenge it. Mills identifies moments in time in which egalitarian rhetoric is in vogue, and proposes that, in these moments, “guilty members of the upper, may come to entertain ideas of a counter-elite” (Mills 1956). One might argue that we are in an era of “egalitarian rhetoric” following the Occupy movement, with its critiques of the one-percent, the Arab Spring uprisings, and increasingly common discussions of the “wealth gap.” If we are indeed in the midst of a new egalitarian era, how might this global context affect the tendency for individuals to develop personal ethics of social responsibility?

Many point to the increasing popularity of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as more evidence that we have entered a new egalitarian era. CSR, heralded as a powerful way to make positive social and environmental change in the world, certainly plays a role in what some see to be a global trend towards promoting social responsibility. Although many definitions exist, CSR, in its simplest form, is about “sacrificing profits in the social interest” (Benabou and Tirole 2010). Traditionally, firms and businesses saw CSR as external to their actual business practices, and this led to the formation of many world-renowned philanthropic foundations funded by successful corporate executives (Auld, Bernstein, and Cashore 2008). Today, however, CSR is focused on “internalizing a firm’s negative externalities,” and businesses are expected to not only reduce negative impacts, but also to engineer creative “win-win” situations in which social and environmental responsibility is also the best practice to yield attractive profits (Auld, Bernstein, and Cashore 2008). Some suggest that consumer demand drives firms and businesses to institute CSR policies while others point to the personal values of company executives
and board members (Benabou and Tirole 2010). Still others hold firmly to the belief that doing well by doing good is possible, and socially responsible firms and businesses will ultimately have the most financial success.

Mills claims that society has adopted a theory of social change that only allows for change within existing systems, and the popularity of CSR seems to suggest that he is correct (Mills 1956). While CSR may be a very good thing in many ways, the very nature of “corporate” social responsibility is that it must function within the framework of neo-capitalism. It is within this neo-capitalist global economy that corporations exist, and that there is a need for “corporate social responsibility.” Whatever change corporations hope to instigate through CSR policies can only exist within the neo-capitalist economy; this begs the question as to whether this can truly be understood as change at all. Indeed, scholars suggest that the very goals of CSR are “seriously at odds with the general tendencies of global capitalism” and question whether CSR is anything more than an “empty gesture” towards ethics in business (Fleming and Jones 2013). If capitalism is indeed “intrinsically anti-social” and “entirely irrational and self-destructive,” we must be suspicious of CSR and the “air of ethicality” it grants to a rotten economic system (Fleming and Jones 2013). Mills warned that the rhetoric of social change is easily co-opted in pursuit of the interests of the power elite. His caution encourages us to examine whether CSR creates real, positive change, or whether the language of corporate responsibility has simply cloaked the anti-social nature of neo-capitalism in the rhetoric of social change.

While this discussion of corporate social responsibility may seem somewhat removed from the discussion of personal social responsibility and service, it is, in fact,
quite intimately related. By understanding the current rhetoric and ideology of social change employed by businesses and corporations in the United States, we may also understand the ideologies embraced by elite institutions like Middlebury College. While not a corporation, Middlebury College is enmeshed within the capitalist system and may reflect a belief in the attractive “win-win” approach to social responsibility, in which profit and social good are not mutually exclusive. Thus, in the same way that the ideology of social change promoted by CSR affects modern day business practices, the rhetoric used by Middlebury College affects whether and how Middlebury graduates go about enacting social change.

We can understand how, in the context of an elite liberal arts institution, exposure to egalitarian rhetoric and social inequality may lead to the development of a personal ethic of social responsibility and may inspire one to challenge the status quo. Alternatively, we can see how a lack of egalitarian ideologies and a blindness to social inequality might instead promote the belief that all inequalities are ‘natural’ and people simply get what they deserve. Finally, we can understand how institutions may co-opt the language of social change in order to promote a type of social change that works within an existing system and fails to truly challenge the status quo.

**Individual Choice in the Institutional Context**

By understanding the ideological content of the meritocracy and the ‘American Dream,’ exploring the creation of social hierarchy and the power elite, and reviewing the history of the liberal arts, it becomes clear that individuals and institutions interact in fascinating ways. Each individual, or student, understands him or herself to be a rational actor, capable of making choices and determining the course of their own life. However,
the theory of new institutionalism argues that institutions significantly influence and shape the beliefs and behaviors of actors that interact with them (Ingram and Clay 2000). The theory of new institutionalism suggests that institutions create the rules that guide and constrain individual choice (Ingram and Clay 2000). While individuals believe themselves to be independent, rational actors, they actually experience a bounded rationality as the constraints of institutions guide their pursuit of self-interests (Ingram and Clay 2000). If we accept this theory, we accept the idea that students’ choices and behaviors are significantly influenced by the institutional context of the college they attend. Thus, it seems that the ideological context of Middlebury College would have a significant impact on the beliefs and behaviors of its students.

Of course, individuals do demonstrate difference, even if they exist within the same institutional context. Bourdieu uses the notion of habitus to explain how an individual’s beliefs, ideas, and preferences can be both personal and subjective and influenced by the social setting in which a person lives (1977). Habitus is the product of socialization, and is developed as society trains individuals to think, feel, and act in certain ways (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus structures individuals’ thoughts, actions, and choices. Yet, Bourdieu acknowledges a degree of individual agency, and allows individuals to be both rational actors and products of society. Hodkinson and Sparkes elaborate on the notion of habitus, suggesting that individuals develop many different conceptual structures that allow people to organize what they know about the world, and together these structures make up our habitus (1997). Thus, we see how individuals, while capable of making individual choices, always do so within a larger social context.
Understanding the theory of new institutionalism and the concept of habitus is particularly helpful when seeking to understand why individuals make certain choices related to social responsibility, service, and social change. As Hodkinson and Sparkes explain, “what is learned is related to the context in which learning takes place and the activities being undertaken whilst it takes place” (1997). In seeking to understand if and how students develop an ethic of social responsibility while at Middlebury, it is vital to consider the context in which they are learning and living. While a personal ethic of social responsibility may not make sense from an individual perspective, it does from an institutional perspective. In an ideal world, institutions would prevent against an entirely individualist society by working to “constrain actors such that their best choices are consistent with the collective good” (Ingram and Clay 2000). In theory, Middlebury College would structure the options available to its actors, or students, such that their best personal choices would also be best for the common good. Middlebury would promote the idea that “we are all better off if we are all better off,” uniting individual and collective interests. This ideal, however, is not often the reality. Instead, “globally inefficient institutions sometimes persist because they favor particular actors who have the power to defend them” (Ingram and Clay 2000). The institutional system is broken, and allows socially and economically powerful institutions like Middlebury College to exist as isolated and inefficient bodies, regardless of their contributions to the common good. Thus, we can understand how the ideological context of Middlebury College structures the choices which individuals make about engaging with social responsibility, service, and social change.
CHAPTER II: READING MIDDLEBURY’S ‘RHETORIC OF RECRUITMENT’

In order to articulate the ideological context of Middlebury College, I turn to an analysis of the materials produced by the institution for marketing and recruitment purposes. Urciuoli suggests that educational marketing now exists as a unique discursive field in which educational institutions use a particular language and rhetoric to tell the consumer (prospective student) not only what type of institution they offer, but also what type of student they will produce (Urciuoli 2003). By exploring Middlebury’s “rhetoric of recruitment,” we can understand what institutional ideology the College promotes for itself.

Middlebury College’s mission statement, which, in theory, functions as the driving force behind all that the College seeks to do, forms the core of Middlebury’s “rhetoric of recruitment” and offers the simplest representation of the ideology of the College. The mission statement is a space in which the institution can clearly and concisely articulate its cultural values, beliefs, and goals, and set itself apart from other liberal arts institutions. The mission statement is as follows:

“At Middlebury College we challenge students to participate fully in a vibrant and diverse academic community. The College's Vermont location offers an inspirational setting for learning and reflection, reinforcing our commitment to integrating environmental stewardship into both our curriculum and our practices on campus. Yet the College also reaches far beyond the Green Mountains, offering a rich array of undergraduate and graduate programs that connect our community to other places, countries, and cultures. We strive to engage students' capacity for rigorous analysis and independent thought within a wide range of disciplines and endeavors, and to cultivate the intellectual, creative, physical, ethical, and social qualities essential for leadership in a rapidly changing global community. Through the pursuit of knowledge unconstrained by national or disciplinary boundaries, students who come to Middlebury learn to engage the world” (Middlebury College Board of Trustees 2006).
While the mission statement is a broad and sweeping pronouncement of what Middlebury College strives to do as an institution of higher education, there is an interesting ideological story being told. While there is no direct mention of a commitment to service and social responsibility in the general mission statement, the values, beliefs, and goals referenced can be understood as fundamental elements of an ethic of social responsibility.

Beyond the simple goal of creating a rich learning environment, the College appears to highlight four important values in its mission statement. First, the College demonstrates a strong commitment to and belief in the importance of cultivating a global consciousness. Students will “learn to engage the world” and prepare for life in a “changing global community.” Second, it is clear that “environmental stewardship” is central to the institution’s ideology. The College proclaims a “commitment to integrating environmental stewardship” into both the “curriculum” and “practices on campus.” Third, the College emphasizes the importance of independent, critical thought and the “pursuit of knowledge unconstrained.” Fourth, we see evidence of a belief in ethical leadership. Together, these four values, global consciousness, environmental stewardship, critical thought, and ethical leadership, converge to create the overarching ideology of Middlebury. Based off my interpretation of the mission statement, I define Middlebury’s ideology as an ethic of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership. This ideology is woven throughout Middlebury’s rhetoric of recruitment and does important work towards the construction of Middlebury as a certain type of institution, capable of producing certain types of individuals.

Having defined what I understand to be Middlebury’s overarching ideology, as outlined by the mission statement, I wish to broaden my discussion of Middlebury’s
rhetoric of recruitment. While my analysis of the mission statement tells us of Middlebury’s ideology of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership, it does not tell how the institution articulates a specific commitment to service and social responsibility. The College’s website functions as the main space through which Middlebury disseminates information about itself, thus I turn to additional sections of the website in order to continue my exploration of the ideological context of Middlebury as told through the College’s rhetoric of recruitment.

The “About Middlebury” page of the website includes three subsections, one of which is titled “Learning for a Lifetime.” It is in this section that we see the College further develop a description of their ‘product,’ defined earlier as type of student the institution strives to produce, and specifically highlight that a commitment to service is something students will learn at Middlebury. The second line of the “Learning for a Lifetime” section explicitly states that Middlebury graduates should be “committed to service, with the courage to follow their convictions and to accept responsibility for their actions.” (Middlebury College website 2013). While the mission statement illustrates the values and beliefs that Middlebury teaches its students, the “Learning for a Lifetime” section clearly articulates how graduates are expected to act on these principles. Being “committed to service” connotes action. Service is not an idea or a belief, but something one must go out and do.

**Putting Ideology Into Action Through Middlebury Programs**

If Middlebury College’s general rhetoric of recruitment promotes an ethic of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership and a commitment to service, what evidence is there that the College is truly invested in teaching its students these lessons? I
turn now to an analysis of the programs and offices highlighted on the College’s website. One could assume that the College programs and offices that offer students access to opportunities outside of the classroom, career and internship advising, and other resources would be reflective of the ideology of the College. Out of the dozens of offices and programs at the College, I identify four whose responsibility it is to concretize students’ ethic of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership and formalize students’ commitment to service. By looking critically at the “rhetoric of recruitment” of each program and office we can see how each reflects the ideology of the College. The question that then remains, which I will explore later, is whether students are called upon to make a real, life-long commitment to service and social responsibility.

The College offers four programs – the Office of Sustainability Integration, the office of Community Engagement, the Center for Social Entrepreneurship, and the Careers in the Common Good program – that serve as concrete pathways through which students learn the values embedded in the ideology of the College and find opportunities for service. The Office of Sustainability, which “seeks to connect, inspire, learn, and act for a more sustainable community,” is responsible for projects on everything from food and dining to carbon neutrality to sustainable design, and seeks to integrate issues of sustainability into academics, athletics, study abroad programs, and more. The goals of this office clearly reflect the College’s advertised commitment to environmental stewardship. Yet an awareness of the importance of sustainability is not enough, and the Office of Sustainability asks “everyone across our campus to be a part of the challenge” of building a “sustainable community.” This would seem to be a clear call for student action in pursuit of a more sustainable campus, community, and world.
The office of Community Engagement serves to integrate “community-connected
teaching, learning, service, and research into your undergraduate experience” and
“promotes the values of learning, reflection, leadership, community, local responsibility,
and international awareness.” This office brings together a number of elements of the
Middlebury mission by giving students opportunities to actively foster their global
consciousness, to practice responsible leadership, and to turn their commitment to service
into tangible results. This office supports community-service orientation trips,
international service through the Middlebury “Alternative Break Program,” connects
students with sixteen on-campus service organizations and other groups in Middlebury,
and facilitates internships that allow for “extended-service” experiences. While the Office
of Sustainability Integration focuses exclusively on sustainability-related projects and
actions, the office of Community Engagement gives students a wider range of options,
letting individuals pursue a variety of interests. Clearly, the office of Community
Engagement envisions a campus where service is a part of each and every student’s life.

Similarly, the Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship (MCSE) serves as a
resource for students looking to engage directly with the world around them. The mission
of the Center for Social Entrepreneurship is “to be a world leader in social change and
development” (MCSE website). The Center claims it builds upon Middlebury’s
commitment to the tradition of the liberal arts by ensuring that students “learn to be
effective agents of social change” (MCSE website). Just as the office of Community
Engagement seeks to connect students with opportunities for service, the MCSE strives to
introduce students to a “global network of schools, NGOs, government agencies,
businesses, and foundations that share a commitment to creating 21st-century solutions”
(MCSE). The MCSE offers grants, fellowships, academic courses, training programs, and a speaker series as means of helping students to become “effective agents of social change.” The MCSE sees an explicit link between its work and the Middlebury mission statement; it is through the MCSE that students will “learn to engage the world” (Middlebury College Board of Trustees 2006).

Finally, I turn to the Careers in the Common Good program. The previous three offices and programs largely focus on educating Middlebury students about sustainability, service, and social entrepreneurship while also giving them opportunities to actively pursue projects, research, and internships on these topics during their four years of college. The Careers in the Common Good program is a sub-section of the Center for Careers and Internships and supports “students and alumni who are interested in pursuing careers that promote social responsibility” (CCG website). What makes the CCG program different from the other three programs, with the MCSE as a partial exception, is the focus on continuing a commitment to “social and environmental interests” in life after graduation. The CCG offers career advising (of the seven on-campus career advisers, one specializes in Careers in the Common Good), internship and job search portals, and tips on writing resumes for nonprofits. The CCG is the main resource available for students who wish to pursue a commitment to social responsibility and service in their life after college or through their careers.

The four offices and programs that I have outlined above are indeed a testament to Middlebury’s commitment to teaching its students an ethic of global enviro-social responsibility, encouraging responsible leadership, and ensuring that each individual graduates with a personal commitment to service. Drawing from both from the
Middlebury mission and the “Learning for a Lifetime” mission, as well as the
descriptions of the four offices and programs above, I have analyzed the institutional
discourse from which I have defined the ideological context of the College. This
discourse constructs the College’s “rhetoric of recruitment,” laden with words and
phrases that allow one to imagine a certain type of community. Students are described as
“agents of social change,” as individuals who are “committed to service,” as people who
“accept responsibility for their actions.” The College itself is a place where
“environmental stewardship” and sustainability are highly valued, where “local
responsibility” and “global awareness” are fostered, and “extended-service” projects are
encouraged.

However, it would be unwise to simply assume that this imagined Middlebury
community reflects the actual community. Here I return to Urciuoli who cautions that
educational marketing, although a unique discursive field, is just like any other marketing
and “one should not expect such rhetoric to actually represent reality” (Urciuoli 2003).
She suggests, “there is likely to be disjuncture between the values embraced in rhetoric
and the practical realization of those values in academic action on the ground” (Urciuoli
2003). If indeed Urciuoli is right, it would suggest that the values of enviro-social
responsibility and a commitment to service espoused on Middlebury’s website may
belong solely to the ideal, imagined Middlebury and not to the actual Middlebury. Yet,
the four programs identified above appear to provide very real resources and
opportunities to students pursuing projects, research, internships, and careers focused on
solving environmental and social problems at the local and global scales. These programs
might serve as evidence that the institution does ensure a “practical realization of those
values” (Urciuoli 2033). However, each program has its own “rhetoric of recruitment” and we must be cautious when analyzing what the programs say they do, and what they actually do. The question then becomes whether or not students are taking actions that demonstrate an ethic of enviro-social responsibility and a commitment to service. That these programs and offices exist is not enough to tell us whether students are actually learning the values and lessons the College claims to teach. Additionally, I would suggest that reoccurring or long-term actions, as opposed to one-time volunteer engagements, would serve as stronger evidence that the College is indeed fulfilling its mission.

I return now to my initial research question to ask whether or not Middlebury truly cultivates a commitment to service and social responsibility in its students. Does Middlebury nurture a desire to be an agent of change in its students? Do Middlebury students emerge with an awareness of and desire to address environmental issues, social injustices and inequalities, and systemic problems? And if they do not, despite the seeming myriad opportunities to become oriented toward working in pursuit of the common good, why might this be? In an attempt to determine whether or not the College cultivates a particular ideological context that translates to action and tangible results, I now turn to an analysis of student experience at Middlebury College.
CHAPTER III: DEVELOPING AN IDEOLOGY

As I suggest in my analysis of the College’s rhetoric of recruitment, Middlebury claims an ideology of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership. However, I suggest that the real ideology of Middlebury College is somewhat more ambiguous, allowing for the reproduction of systems of inequality alongside tentative social change. Although the institution emphasizes social responsibility and service as central to its mission, its ambiguous ideological context fails to create an environment that demands action and commitment on the part of the students. The student responses presented below provide supporting evidence for this claim. The words, stories, and opinions of the five students interviewed offer us a personal and detailed window into the lived experience of Middlebury students, and the lessons they learn. Of course, the responses below do not constitute a representative sample and can in no way encompass the experiences, beliefs, and opinions of all Middlebury students. However, I hope that the responses of these five students can help to shed light on the ways in which the particular institutional context and ideology of Middlebury College shapes the beliefs, values, and choices of individuals.

An Analysis of Student Experience: Survey and Personal Interviews

Participants filled out a short survey (see Appendix I) following their personal interview. In addition to demographic questions, all participants were asked to answer three related questions about Middlebury College and its alleged focus on social responsibility and service. In general, the students’ responses confirmed my hypothesis regarding the ambiguity of the College’s ideology and mission. The students tended to believe that the culture and curriculum of Middlebury College ought to emphasize the
importance of a lifelong commitment to social responsibility and service. Yet, my participants described an institution that allows students to choose whether or not they engage with the topics of injustice and inequality, confirming my hypothesis that the ideological structure of Middlebury fails to demand a real commitment to enacting positive social change. The ideology of Middlebury encourages students to invest time, effort, and passion in whatever they do, and while some students may focus their energies on incorporating social responsibility and service into their lives, many do not. The responses explored below seem to suggest that an ideology of individualism trumps that of global enviro-social responsibility, leadership, and service, and allows students with drastically different values, worldviews, and goals to co-exist harmoniously within the institutional context of Middlebury College.

The majority of my participants believe that Middlebury College has a responsibility to teach its students to be agents of positive change in the world. However, no consensus was reached as to whether or not the College fulfills this responsibility. Some claimed that Middlebury students graduate with an awareness of and desire to address injustice and inequality, and that the College instills in its students a deep commitment to service, while others claimed that “the vast majority of students do not” ever even consider social responsibility and service. Over and over, my participants emphasized the significance of individual choice, suggesting that what a student chooses to major in has the greatest impact on the lessons and values they learn at Middlebury. These responses suggest that the ideology of social responsibility and service is not entirely hegemonic, but rather only serves as a structuring force in certain campus spaces.
I suggest that these responses are evidence that Middlebury’s ideology is multifaceted, and while some students appreciate the flexibility of an ambiguous ideological structure, others remain critical. For example, Tom, an Environmental Studies-Policy major, suggested that while “Middlebury has the responsibility to provide the opportunities to allow students to explore injustice and inequality for themselves, there should not be a ‘political’ agenda from the College.” In contrast, Chris, an Economics major, criticized the College’s ideological ambiguity, suggesting that the College does have a responsibility to create agents of positive change because “it is in its mission statement.” Here we see a clash of student opinion about the purpose of Middlebury, with one student promoting institutional neutrality and another suggesting the institution’s mission statement negates the opportunity for neutrality. Interestingly, despite his appreciation of the seeming lack of a College-driven political agenda, Tom conceded that his Environmental Studies classes “have shaped [his] politics.” These responses not only confirm my hypothesis that the ideology of Middlebury significantly influences students’ beliefs, values, and politics, but also my hypothesis that Middlebury purposefully creates a multifaceted ideology of individualism such that a diversity of individuals can feel like Middlebury is a good “match” for them. Whatever ones principles or habitus may be, Middlebury’s ideology of individualism ensures that all students may have their beliefs affirmed and reinforced.

In addition to the brief survey, I conducted personal interviews with all five of my participants. In each interview, using a series of questions and conversation topics (see

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2 To clarify, the College’s Mission Statement does not use the exact language that Chris uses, but rather references the fundamental elements of an ideology of social responsibility and social change.
Appendix II), I sought to determine whether the individual felt that Middlebury College succeeds in cultivating in its students an ethic of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership that inspires concrete action within and beyond the Middlebury community. I begin with a discussion of why each participant chose to attend Middlebury College, followed by a discussion of the four main themes that emerged from my interviews in answer to my research question.

**Why Middlebury?**

When asked to reflect on what had initially attracted them to Middlebury College, my five participants cited everything from familial connections to specific academic offerings to the type of student community they believed to be fostered by the College. Each individual remembered learning about Middlebury from different sources during the college application process. Some had a sibling or an older family member who had attended Middlebury, and they pointed to these family members as the main source of information about Middlebury. Others remember using college handbooks, as well as the Middlebury website and campus tours, to learn about the College. It is important to distinguish between these two types of sources. A prospective student that turns to family members for information may develop a better sense of the real, lived experience of being a student at Middlebury. In contrast, a prospective student who lacks the personal connection and turns to handbooks, website pages, and college-produced sources would primarily be exposed to the College’s rhetoric of recruitment. If Urciuoli’s suggestion is correct and “one should not expect such rhetoric [of recruitment] to actually represent reality,” the students with familial connections may develop a different, and potentially
more accurate, understanding of the College than students relying on college-produced materials.

Both Chris and Adam explained that a big selling point for them had been the type of student community the College seemed to foster and the type of people the College attracted. Chris gathered most of his information about the College through formal, college-produced channels. Chris remembers that a visit to campus during the application process left him with a very positive impression of Middlebury. He remembers thinking, "Okay, here is a group of really goofy, out-there people who know how to have fun and be themselves, and they are also doing all this amazing stuff. They are on the leading edge of change, right?" Chris remembers his excitement at having found an exceptional academic community that also offered him the type of engaged, progressive social community he wanted. That Middlebury was a place where smart, passionate young people appeared to be challenging the status quo and working towards impressive positive change was a major selling point for Chris.

Like Chris, Adam was attracted to the social environment he found at Middlebury. Unlike Chris, who learned about Middlebury through more formal channels (e.g. campus tours and visits), Adam had an older sister at Middlebury and credits her with his decision to come to Middlebury. As a high school student, he enjoyed the opportunity to visit his sister and attend college parties, but he also remembers thinking Middlebury seemed to be “a collection of just really good people.” He liked what he saw as a very tight-knit community, and liked that “people stick together who are from Middlebury.” He was saw that Middlebury students bonded over the fact that “they all came to this place and had a really good time here.” While he was more interested in the social life and athletics
offered by Middlebury, “the wood chip burning facility was harped quite a bit” when he was applying to college in 2009. The school, he thought, wanted to advertise its commitment to social responsibility, but he did not personally see evidence of this commitment during his informal visits with his sister.

While both Chris and Adam were attracted to the social environment of Middlebury College, the differences in their answers are striking. The values that Chris identifies as appealing, such as a commitment to positive change, are the values that are emphasized in the College’s mission statement and rhetoric of recruitment. Chris believed he was applying to a school whose guiding ideology was one of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership. Adam, however, failed to identify these values as a defining aspect of Middlebury, and instead focused on the perceived unification of the student body. This production of a tight-knit, exclusive social community is reminiscent of the class reproduction that Mills’ describes as the ultimate purpose of elite, American colleges (Mills 1956). Adam, who was exposed to the lived experience of Middlebury students prior to enrollment, failed to identify the ideology of Middlebury as described in the College’s rhetoric of recruitment, and instead identified institutional values that seem to further social division and hierarchy. These responses highlight an apparent discrepancy between the alleged and practiced ideology of Middlebury College.

Other students remember being drawn to Middlebury College for the specific academic offerings. Students pointed to the exceptional language program and Middlebury’s extensive study abroad offerings as reasons they had applied to Middlebury. But, it was not only specific classes and programs that had appealed to these individuals as prospective students, but also the generally rigorous academic
environment. Tom remembers knowing “very superficially, it [Middlebury] was the number four liberal arts college.” The prestige and acclaim associated with a college like Middlebury influenced the decisions that Tom was making. He remembers worrying about the statistics, believing that “what the acceptance rate is obviously tells a lot about a place.”

As demonstrated by these five individuals, some prospective students turn to family members for guidance and information while others use more formal channels, such as the college’s website, campus tours, and arranged visits, to gather information about the institution. Four of my participants relied heavily on formal, college-generated information to learn about Middlebury College. They were exposed to the full scope of the College’s rhetoric of recruitment and were attracted by what seemed to be exceptional academic offerings, an extensive study abroad program, and a campus environment in which students were challenged to make positive change in their community and beyond. These three elements are vital to the fulfillment of Middlebury’s mission to cultivate an ethic of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership, and a commitment to service in its students. The outstanding academics would provide students with opportunities to delve deep into many subjects, allow students to “ask the hard questions” about our changing society and world; the language programs and study abroad opportunities would allow students to develop a real global awareness; a campus environment that supports engagement and change would allow students to put the lessons they were learning in the classroom into real, tangible action. These responses confirm my hypothesis that Middlebury claims an ideology of global enviro-social responsibility and
leadership, but Adam’s description of Middlebury as a tight-knit, in-ward focused, exclusive community suggests the practiced ideology may be something else entirely.

**The College As Neutral Facilitator?**

Here I explore how students understand and relate to Middlebury College as an institution, and how this structures their belief, or lack thereof, in the institution’s ability to teach students the importance of social responsibility and service. In general, students tend to applaud Middlebury for allowing them to explore a wide variety of subjects and perspectives. They say that the College provides ample opportunities for students to educate themselves about topics related to social and environmental responsibility, and provides occasion for students to engage in service. Students describe Middlebury College as a facilitator, not an enforcer, at least as it relates to teaching social responsibility and service.

To recall, Delbanco’s definition of “university” describes an institution whose purpose is to facilitate the “gathering of all knowledge into a unified whole” (Delbanco 2012). It seems that students tend to understand Middlebury College as exactly that – a neutral facilitator that allows for exposure to a diverse set of knowledge. For example, Tom, an Environmental Studies major, explained that Middlebury’s distribution requirements are the reason the “school does a good job of exposing people” to different subjects and perspectives. Similarly, Adam, an Economics major, admitted that the distribution requirements had led him to take a number of classes he “hadn’t wanted to take, but ended up really enjoying.” Tara, an International Politics and Economics major, echoed Adam’s thought, explaining that the distribution requirements had allowed her to develop a wide breadth of knowledge. Interestingly, although fulfillment of the
distribution requirements is required for graduation, the students tended to understand the
requirements as a means of facilitation, rather than enforcement. While the distribution of
classes exposes students to a diversity of topics and perspectives in an academic setting,
it does not require that students alter their principles or actions outside of the classroom.
Thus, although somewhat of a contradiction, students described the College as a
facilitator, not an enforcer.

While these five students applauded Middlebury for creating a curriculum that
allowed them to sample all types of classes, including creative writing classes, lab
science courses, history courses, and more, they failed to identify ways in which the
distributions requirements facilitate an exploration of social responsibility and service
within the curriculum. When asked to speak about concrete ways that the College
facilitates an examination of the topics of social justice, power, privilege, and oppression,
the five students pointed to optional, extracurricular activities, and their references
remained vague. Adam said that students “are constantly getting emails about some sort
of panel discussion or debate over a topic that someone deems controversial or socially
irresponsible or really just socially relevant.” Adding to his point, Adam feels that, by
hosting these types of events, the College sends the message that “it is okay to think
differently and to think progressively,” but he is grateful the College “maintains a sort of
unbiased approach” by relegating these events to the extracurricular sphere. Only John
suggested that the College had done a lot to encourage the “social responsibility aspect by
giving the myriad of classes that you can take in that discipline,” but he failed to name
any specific courses that focused on social justice, inequality, privilege, or general social
responsibility. Chris suggested that “maybe in SOAN [Sociology/Anthropology] courses”
one would encounter such discussions, but seemed hesitant to make such a claim. He admitted that he “didn’t know of anything else” the College did to require students to engage with these topics.

It is important that students primarily identified optional, extracurricular activities (forums, panels, discussions, debates) when asked how Middlebury teaches its students the importance of social responsibility. Not only do the College’s distribution requirements contradict the image of the College as a mere facilitator, they also fail to teach students values that are in line with the College’s alleged ideology of global environmental-social responsibility and leadership. Although students alluded to opportunities within the required curriculum that emphasize the importance of social responsibility, most had not personally enrolled in such courses. They also seemed to have little personal experience with the extracurricular opportunities they spoke of; none of them named a panel, forum, or debate that they had personally attended. These opportunities require significant student initiative, and John summed up the sentiments expressed by all five students, saying that, “at the end of the day, it's a personal choice whether you pursue those resources.”

I suggest that the College’s academic distribution requirements and physical education requirements impose certain lessons and values on students, and destroy the image of the College as merely a neutral facilitator of knowledge. The College makes its principles clear when students have the ability to choose whether to engage with issues of social and environmental justice, but do not have a choice regarding their participation in physical education classes. Students may believe the institution has little control over the lessons and principles they learn, but the theory of new institutionalism, as proposed by
Ingram and Clay, suggests that the beliefs and behaviors of individuals are significantly influenced and constrained by the institutions they interact with (2000). If the ideology of Middlebury College is truly one of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership, as the College’s rhetoric of recruitment suggests, it would seem that this ideology would permeate everything that students do, from the classes they take to the extracurricular activities they engage in. If this ideology were as powerful a structuring force as my definition of the term suggests it to be, it would seem that all students should demonstrate authentic interest in and engagement with social and environmental issues and service.

There are many concrete ways, like the use of distribution requirements or physical education requirements, that the institution ensures students are exposed to the issues and lessons it deems most important. There are also many invisible means, such as ideological structuring, through which the College exerts its influence over the students. This again suggests that the ideology of Middlebury should have a significant impact on its students, and be reflected in the stories these students tell. Yet the students interviewed paint a picture of an institution that relegates education about social and environmental issues to the periphery, reserved for optional, extracurricular engagements; the students paint a picture of an institution that fails to make explorations of social responsibility, ethical leadership, and service central elements of the Middlebury experience.

**Majors Matter Most**

While the students tended to generalize, claiming the College demonstrated an overarching commitment to teaching the importance of social responsibility, they provided an important caveat to their argument. Students claimed that one’s major of study is the single most important factor in determining whether or not an individual
develops an ethic of social responsibility and a commitment to service. Students suggest that vastly different lessons and values are taught, depending on the major and department, and that a student’s major structures the type of the extracurriculars they will engage with. This argument stands in sharp contrast to the initial suggestion that all Middlebury students are encouraged to educate themselves about important social issues. The students interviewed contradicted themselves, first suggesting that the College ensures all students learn the importance of social responsibility, and then suggesting that such lessons are, in reality, only available to students in certain academic departments.

While Middlebury’s distribution requirements compel students to take a variety of courses outside their area of major study, students must focus their energy in one or two departments should they wish to complete the requirements for their major. If Middlebury’s mission is to create citizens with a highly developed personal ethic of global enviro-social responsibility, it would follow that this emphasis would be woven throughout courses within all majors, leading each and every student to believe in the importance of social responsibility. However, the students interviewed tell a different story; whether or not one develops of a personal ethic of social responsibility depends entirely on the classes one takes at Middlebury. Adam explained that the “desire to be socially responsible probably comes from a collection of outside factors,” but is best cultivated through “academic pursuits,” something he does not see happening within the curriculum at Middlebury. Similarly, John, an Environmental Economics major,
conceded that, while at Middlebury, he doesn’t often think about social issues. When asked why, he ventured that it may be because he has not “taken a social justice course.”

Although it no doubt difficult to generalize across all courses in all majors, the students identified certain majors that they believe more successfully push students to think critically social and environmental responsibility. Both John and Tom commended the Environmental Studies program for a curriculum that introduces students to a variety of social and environmental issues, and the intimate connections between the two. John credits his experience in the Environmental Studies department as responsible for his “interest in making a difference” in the world. Tom explained that many of his Environmental Studies courses have touched upon the “inherent injustice of climate change” or “issues of the environment and gender.” Many of the discussions in his classes have focused on the fact that “the environment is everywhere and it’s rife with inequality.” Tom believes the Environmental Studies department does an excellent job of educating students about environmental and social injustice, but admits “it’s definitely easy at this school, through other majors, to not have any of that.” Adam shared the same opinion, declaring that “Environmental Studies classes and any sort of SOAN [Sociology/Anthropology] class” likely cultivate the “desire to be socially responsible,” but others do not.

Throughout the interviews, students repeatedly pointed to the Environmental Studies department and the Sociology/Anthropology department as responsible for developing a critical lens through which students begin to understand the intricacies of global

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3 It should be noted that Middlebury does not offer a department or collection of courses focused on “social justice;” this reference to “social justice courses” is simply John’s description.
problems. It should be noted that Environmental Studies is one of the most popular majors at Middlebury College, accounting for 8 percent of the class of 2013; Sociology/Anthropology graduates far fewer majors, accounting for only 3 percent of the class of 2013 (Middlebury College 2013). In contrast, students pointed to the Economics department as one that fails to sufficiently address the importance of social and environmental responsibility, and instead fast-tracks students into the finance sector and high-paying careers. This is significant, given that Economics is the most popular major at Middlebury, accounting for 13 percent of the class of 2013 (Middlebury College 2013).

Tara, an International Politics and Economics major, spoke about her academic experiences in the Economics department. Upon arriving at Middlebury, Tara was attracted to Economics because she was interested in investment banking and “‘helping’ companies grow.” After stumbling into a Social Entrepreneurship class, Tara realized that helping companies grow was not the kind of ‘help’ she wanted to be doing, but rather she “wanted to be solving the crucial and millions of problems that there are” in the world. This Social Entrepreneurship class allowed Tara to look back on the Economics courses she has tad taken with a fresh perspective, and she is critical, saying the “biggest problem about Economics is that there is limited discussion about things.” Tara described her Economics classes as being “all about learning these formulas, learning these graphs, learning the principles of economics; I've literally never been in an Econ [Economics] class – and for my major, I’ve taken six Econ classes – where there's a discussion session.” Tara blamed this lack of discussion for the narrow-minded belief in economic growth she sees among Economics majors. She suggested that the lack of critical analysis
is the reason Economics students have little interest in social responsibility, service, or careers in the common good. While this disengagement with the world’s problems may be unique to the Economics department, Tara suggested it might also hold true in the hard sciences departments.

Adam, an Economics major, offered a different point of view. He defended the Economics department, saying that they do examine social issues, but through an “economic lens.” He pointed to discussions of “social entrepreneurship and social development” as evidence of the department’s willingness to explore ways in which economics can have a “social ethic.” Yet, Adam admitted that an emphasis on social responsibility was distinctly absent from his academic experiences, and acknowledged that none of his courses at Middlebury had required him to engage with or think critically about the topic. Reflecting on what he had learned throughout his four years at Middlebury, Adam acknowledged that he is “probably not emerging with an awareness of social injustice and inequality.” Here it helpful to recall Bourdieu’s assertion that “blindness to social inequalities both obliges and allows one to explain all inequalities, as natural inequalities, unequal giftedness” (1979). If students like Adam remain blind to the inequality in society, this allows them to maintain a belief in a ‘Just World,’ in which each individual gets what they deserve; this allows them to maintain a belief in the meritocracy and this precludes any desire to help others, as others have failed due to an inherent lack of merit.

Choosing to Care

While the students acknowledged some ways in which Middlebury College exerts its influence over the student body, they demonstrated an overwhelming belief in the power
of personal choice and individual autonomy. On the survey, four out of five participants said Middlebury College has a responsibility to teach its students to be agents of positive change. Yet, when asked in the interviews whether Middlebury College could teach its students to be committed to social responsibility and service, all five students argued that it would be a challenge given that individuals have unique interests and passions, and many choose not to ‘care.’ They suggested that, regardless of what the institution does, certain individuals, including some students interviewed, would never feel compelled to commit to a socially responsible lifestyle, an engagement in service opportunities, or a career in pursuit of the common good.

When asked to elaborate, students described a divided campus. On one side are the students who ‘care;’ these individuals eagerly engage with and work to solve social and environmental challenges within the Middlebury community and beyond. These students may be members of the Socially Responsible Investment club or the Divestment club; they might be working to address homophobia on campus; they might be working with the “It Happens Here” program to start conversation about sexual assault on campus; they may be facilitating discussions of power, privilege, and identity through the JusTalks program. On the other side are the students who do not ‘care,’ and these individuals devote their energies to other interests, such as sports, music, or theatre. Adam was quick to identify the on-campus divide, explaining that “there certainly is a clear line between the kids who really are passionate about it [social responsibility] and want to make a difference” and the rest of campus. He explained that the students who ‘care’ are an identifiable group on campus because “the kids who are really wanting to promote social responsibility seem to be the same group of students throughout, rather than a dynamic
set of people that is constantly changing.” Adam places himself in the “more passive”
group on campus – the collection of students who think social responsibility is “an
interesting topic that merits a discussion,” but do not engage with it personally. He admits
that, while at Middlebury” he has “never really found the time or passion” to explore
problems of social injustice, inequality, or ways in which he could live a more socially
responsible life.

Chris describes the Middlebury community similarly, suggesting that the group of
students who ‘care’ is the minority. As someone who was attracted to Middlebury by a
student body that seemed committed to making positive change in the world, he has
purposefully sought out friends with similar values, but it has taken concerted effort.
Chris says that while he has found kindred spirits in the “people who want change, and
know how to make change,” they “are not classic Middlebury students at all.” Chris
admits that he was surprised by the general attitude of the student body, saying, “I didn't
expect to find so many people in that apathetic middle.”

But, how much control does the College have over whether Middlebury students want
to live socially responsible lives, work in service to others, or find a career in pursuit of
the common good? The students expressed considerable doubt in the ability of the
College to teach such values. Tom claimed that the College can provide the “medium for
people to broaden their horizons, but ultimately it's a choice - you can't force people to do
something.” Adam echoed this sentiment, explaining that “Middlebury presents these
issues and these topics for you, but if you do not feel compelled to really explore them,
you don't have to.” The descriptions provided by these students paint the picture of an
institution in which personal interest trumps institutional influence or requirement. Here,
I wish to return to Tara’s story of the Social Entrepreneurship class that led her away from a career in finance to an interest in careers in the common good. While her story may be unique, it demonstrates that institutions, and colleges in particular, do have the ability to change the minds of individuals. Although Tara’s story suggests otherwise, the students interviewed believed that institutions cannot force individual to act or think in certain ways.

In keeping with this, the students tended to take personal responsibility for their lack of interest in social justice or social responsibility. They emphasized their choice in the matter, claiming not to have chosen to pursue courses or extracurriculars that would have introduced them to important social issues. Although they claimed ownership over their lack of interest, students appeared to feel embarrassed, if not guilty, for not feeling compelled to work for positive social change. They seemed concerned that their lack of interest might reflect badly on their character. For example, John confessed that, in general, addressing social injustice and inequality is important, but “it's not something that I focused on as much; I haven’t been proactive.” He worried about his reputation though, saying, “I sound like I’m soulless if I say I don't [care].” Similarly, in reference to social responsibility, service, and activism, Adam said, “I don’t disagree with it or think it’s a terrible idea, but it's not something that I have too much experience with because I never really went out there and tried to be as proactive.” Tom admitted that developing an ethic of social responsibility is “a self-driven kind of thing.” Even if students choose not to engage with pressing social issues, they do demonstrate a degree of self-awareness and self-consciousness that suggests they believe doing good in the world is the ‘right’ thing.
While this description of a divided campus, in which each student chooses to ‘care’ or not, may reflect the actual, lived experience of Middlebury students, it fails to account for the power and influence of the institution. It is helpful here to return to the notion of habitus because it allows us to understand how each individual’s beliefs, ideas, preferences, and interests can be both personal and subjective, and influenced by the social and institutional contexts around them (Bourdieu 1977). While it is far too simplistic to say that some students innately care and others do not, it is also necessary to acknowledge that all students have been socialized such that they each possess a unique habitus. Upon their arrival at Middlebury, some individuals may be predisposed to take more of an interest in service and social responsibility due to their family, their religious beliefs, their upbringing, and more. But, habitus, as a product of socialization, can change, and after four years at Middlebury each individual’s ways of thinking, feeling, and acting will have been newly shaped and formed by the ideological context of Middlebury. Thus, the students’ one-dimensional explanation of why some students care and others do not fails to account for the influence of Middlebury. If Middlebury’s ideology is one of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership, these principles should be reflected in each student at the end of their four years at the College.

Building upon the ideas of habitus and socialization, I return now to Ingram and Clay’s theory of bounded rationality, in which individual independence and rationality is constrained and structured by the institutions they interact with. Institutions, through visible and invisible means, influence the choices individuals believe they are making as independent, rational beings. By suggesting that the College functions as an excellent facilitator, students seem to be placing the responsibility for action in the hands of the
students. By suggesting that some students simply are not interested in social responsibility, service, or a career in the common good, students seem to understand these ‘interests’ are static and unchanging. They say, the College provides the opportunities; the students must choose to engage. However, just as the notion of habitus would suggest that society influences the development of each individual, the theory of bounded rationality would propose that students do not make any decision free from the influence of the institution. If students, acting with only partial independence and individual rationality, are not choosing to pursue activities the College provides as a means of exploring issues related to social justice, inequality, oppression, power, and privilege, the College may be to blame.
CHAPTER IV: PUTTING IDEOLOGY INTO ACTION THROUGH CAREERS

In my attempt to determine whether or not Middlebury College teaches its students the importance of social responsibility and a commitment to service, I turn now to an analysis of the career choices of Middlebury graduates. If indeed Middlebury teaches the lessons it claims to, I suggest that Middlebury students will emerge with an awareness of and desire to address environmental issues, social injustices and inequalities, and systemic problems, and this desire to create positive change will be reflected in the career choices of Middlebury graduates. I suggest that an analysis of the career choices of graduates is one way to determine whether or not students are taking concrete actions that demonstrate a learned ethic of global enviro-social responsibility and a commitment to service. Alternatively, if graduates appear to be making career decisions with the goal of preserving or improving their own social and economic status, this may suggest that Middlebury fails to inspire a true commitment to lifelong social responsibility, ethical leadership, service, and positive social change.

I asked each of my participants to speak about their post-graduation plans. Each individual was asked whether they had found employment after graduation. If so, they were asked to elaborate on what factors had led them to their job. Four out of five of my interviewees had secured employment at the time of the interviews; John as an Analyst at a private equity firm, Chris as an Analyst at a large consulting firm, Tom as a Policy Fellow at a solar development firm, and Adam as an Analyst at a large investment bank.

Making Hard Choices: Doing Well By Doing Good

At the time of the interviews, the students were only a few months away from graduation. As they searched for employment, some students described a tension between
the desire to do well for themselves and the desire to do good in the world. For some, the ideal career would allow them to do well for themselves, financially and professionally, while doing good in the world. However, students questioned whether such a career was an attainable reality, and suggested that personal success is often the necessary priority, at least in the short-term.

Students were quick to assert that financial success is not the only thing they hope to get out of a career. Chris emphasized the importance of finding a career that not only provides him with a sense of financial security, but explained that “money in and of itself is clearly not the ticket to happiness,” and “professional development,” for the sake of a better salary, is not his only goal. Tara echoed his thoughts, explaining that she “cares less about making a ton of money” than about being “effective in [her] work and making big changes.” Similarly, Tom acknowledged that he hopes his career will “guarantee some sort of financial security,” but he also hopes it will make a “positive impact” on the world. He asserted that he “won’t work somewhere just because it offers a lot of money” and that he wouldn’t work for a company if [he] didn’t believe in what they were doing.”

It seems that these students are looking for a version of success that includes financial and professional development, and the opportunity to make positive change in the world.

Yet, students believe that this version of success may not be so easily achieved. As an example, John admitted that, while he’d like to end up working in the renewable energy sector, he believes that he will likely experience a “ten year progression” through the energy industry first. He admitted that “professional development in any sector is the number one priority” after graduation. Chris echoed this sentiment, explaining that he wants to “get really involved in NGOs, maybe even start [his] own someday,” but “it's
difficult to get straight there.” Most people, he says, choose to “scale a couple parallel ladders, like Goldman Sachs or a consultancy, and then jump” to their sector of interest which is often something that demonstrates a stronger commitment to solving social or environmental problems. Chris worried that this career shift does not always occurs, saying, “we'll see as life goes on if people make that jump.” Students believe that finding a career that satisfies one’s desire for a comfortable life is relatively easy. Finding a career that creates positive social and environmental change is much more difficult, and requires deep self-reflection, thoughtfulness, commitment, and patience.

Despite the fact that some students profess an interest careers that allow them to do well by doing good, this is not representative of the average Middlebury student. Just as many Middlebury students do not demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility and service in the academic setting, many do not seem to do so in their careers either. Tara explained that she sees many students choosing “between doing well for themselves and doing good for the world,” and most tend to choose “something that pays well and might not have the social aspect.” For some, a well-paying career is a necessity for survival, but Tom suggested that many Middlebury students are “financially comfortable” and have the freedom to choose careers that improve the state of the world. He expressed frustration, saying that the majority of students who come to Middlebury with this “financial baseline” never stop to consider that they "don't necessarily need to keep making a bunch of money.” Tom described Middlebury and similar liberal arts institutions as “wealthy places,” but explained that few people stop to consider that their wealth and privilege might allow them to pursue careers in the common good without sacrificing their own socio-economic position. The institution, Tom says, does not ask
students to think about how to use their wealth and privilege “to better things,” but rather encourages a sort of “job search-rat race” that leads students to careers in consulting firms and finance companies.

Tara expanded on this point, suggesting that while she believes doing well for oneself by doing good is possible, many students at Middlebury assume they would need to sacrifice a certain lifestyle in order to do so. She explained that, at Middlebury, many of her friends who are looking to work in finance are doing so because they are accustomed to “extremely luxurious lives” and “don't want less than that.” Echoing Tom’s critiques, this suggests that Middlebury College fails to help its students recognize and grapple with their privilege, and instead aids in a process of class reproduction. Rather than ask members of the power elite, to use Mills’ phrase, to use their social, economic, political, and institutional power to enact deep, systemic change, it seems that Middlebury is content to send its students into the existing capitalist system that continues to widen the wealth gap in the United States. If students do not choose to attend optional, extracurricular panels and forums on pressing social issues, or if students do not wish to commit themselves to service during their four years of college, it may have little effect on the state of the world. But when the graduates of an elite, liberal arts institution like Middlebury College fail to demonstrate a commitment to socially responsible careers, and instead pursue careers that reinforce class hierarchies and inequality, and protect power and privilege in the hands of the few, this has very real consequences for the future of society at large.

What Middlebury Graduates Do
Thanks to hefty student debt, a weak job market, and a high cost of living in many cities, the transition from college to the so-called ‘real world’ can be a difficult one. Finding a job, much less a well-paying one, after graduation can prove to be a challenge. However, a recent report suggests that individuals with higher levels of education were protected from the worst impacts of the recession, and only 6 percent of graduates with Bachelor’s degrees report being excluded from the workforce⁴ (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2013). In reality, it seems that many graduates do find jobs, many of which provide both financial stability and a sense of personal fulfillment. For some, a job is simply a way to support oneself. For some, as evidenced by the post-graduation goals explained by my participants, a job can provide an opportunity to pursue a lifelong passion, explore a personal interest, or solve any one of the world’s problems.

According to data provided by the Institutional Research (IR) Department of Middlebury College, the class of 2012 saw the highest rate of employment amongst graduating seniors. The survey, conducted by IR in late spring of 2012, found that 43 percent of graduating seniors had already secured employment for after graduation (Middlebury Institutional Research). This was up from 36 percent in 2011, 34 percent in 2010, and only a quarter of the class in the midst of the economic crisis in 2009 (Middlebury Institutional Research). This data mirrors national data that suggests the job market has improved slightly since the worst depths of the recession.

When comparing the post-graduation plans for graduates from the classes of 2011 and 2012, one major similarity stands out. In both 2011 and 2012, the three sectors employing the largest percentage of the graduating class were education/academia,

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⁴ In the report produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts, “excluded” is defined as someone who desires work but is unable to find employment.
finance/banking, and consulting (Middlebury Institutional Research). By May of 2011, 17 percent, 15 percent, and 13 percent of the graduating class was employed in education/academia, finance/banking, and consulting respectively. By May of 2012, 22 percent, 12 percent, and 15 percent of the graduating class was employed in education/academia, finance/banking, and consulting (Middlebury Institutional Research). We see clearly that the education/academia sector claimed the largest percentage of the Middlebury graduating class in both 2011 and 2012. The finance/banking and consulting sectors followed in second and third place, although finance/banking claimed more graduates in 2011 and consulting claimed more in 2012. Of the graduates that had secured post-graduation employment, the three sectors represented 45 percent and 49 percent, respectively, of the graduating classes of 2011 and 2012. The remaining graduates are spread across an additional thirteen sectors, including everything from research to media and communications to travel/tourism.

Here I to return to my discussion of Middlebury’s Careers in the Common Good program. As explained earlier, the Careers in the Common Good office is a sub-section of the Center for Careers and Internships and supports “students and alumni who are interested in pursuing careers that promote social responsibility” (CCG website). The CCG is one of the only offices and programs at Middlebury specifically intended to help students identify ways in which they can continue their commitment to “social and environmental interests” after graduation. The CCG hosts a blog that provides students with information and resources related to internships and careers “in the common good.” On the blog, there are seven sectors listed as offering opportunities for those looking for a career that promotes “social and environmental responsibility” (CCG blog). These seven
sectors are as follows: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Social Entrepreneurship, Environment, Global Health, International Development, Non-Profit, Sustainable Food, and Education. There are, of course, likely to be jobs that fall outside one of these sectors that promote “social and environmental responsibility,” as well as jobs within these sectors that fail to fulfill the mission of a career in the common good. However, these categories, as defined by Middlebury College, provide us with a useful point of comparison when looking at the post-graduation career plans of Middlebury graduates. An analysis of the post-graduation career plans of Middlebury graduates allow us to determine what percentage of the graduating class plans to go into a “career in the common good.”

While the employment sector categories listed on the IR post-graduation plans survey do not match up identically with categories listed on the CCG blog, it is possible to estimate where the categories overlap. I identify five employment sector categories on the IR survey that can be classified as “careers in the common good,” according to the sectors listed on the CCG website. These five sectors are as follows: Education/Academia, Food and Agriculture, Non-Profit, Social/Human Services, and Environment and Energy. As mentioned before, the Education/Academia sector represents the highest percentage of post-graduate employment, and I will offer a more detailed account of the jobs secured in this sector below. The other four categories represent much smaller percentages of the graduating class. In 2011, Food and Agriculture and Non-Profit sector jobs represented only 4 percent each. Social/Human Services represented 3 percent, and Environment and Energy represented a mere 2 percent. In 2012, Food and Agriculture represented 5 percent, Environment and Energy
represented for 4 percent, Non-Profit represented 2 percent, and Social/Human Services was not visible on the chart. In total, 30 percent of the 2011 graduating class and 33 percent of the 2012 class were employed in a sector that offers opportunities in the common good. That approximately one third of Middlebury’s graduating class goes into a career in the common good may seem rather impressive. However, I provide a caveat to these calculations.

Due to the way in which the data was collected, employers may be included in the “common good” categories, even if they do not satisfy the requirements of a socially responsible company. For example, a graduate working at a fair-trade coffee cooperative and a graduate working for Sodexo, a French multinational corporation with many human rights violations on its record, may both be included in the Food and Agriculture category. Thus, I wish to caution the reader that the actual percentage of graduates that pursue a career in the common good may be far less than one third.

Furthermore, while the Education/Academia sector is included in the category of common good careers, I suggest that not all educational institutions ought to be included in this category. Middlebury College provides the names of the schools and educational programs that employ its graduates. Access to education is indeed a precious and vital right, however, many of the institutions that employ Middlebury graduates are private, preparatory schools that boast tuitions between $30,000 and $55,000. Additionally, any graduate employed by Middlebury College itself is included within this category. While many of these institutions provide exceptional financial aid packages, we must seriously consider whether a career at an elite, private elementary or high school is truly a career in the “common good.” As discussed previously, institutions such as these were,
historically, responsible for separating the true elite from the nouveau riche and other undeserving families, all the while ensuring that the power elite retained their hold on the social, economic, and political capital of the United States (Soares 2007). I suggest that it is naïve to assume that all careers in the Education/Academia field can be counted as common good careers, and if we remove Education/Academia from the final tally, we find that only 13 percent of graduates in 2011 and 11 percent in 2012 sought employment in a common good career.

The data suggests that Middlebury sees approximately one third of its graduates seeking employment in a common good career, but this drops to less than one sixth if Education/Academia is removed, and even less if we account for companies in other sectors that fail to demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility. In order to make sense of this percentage, I find it useful to contextualize Middlebury by offering a brief comparison to other elite, liberal arts institutions. Swarthmore College, located in Pennsylvania, offers combined career statistics for the graduating classes of 2004 through 2013, and reports that 45 percent of graduates enter the for-profit sector, 36 percent enter the non-profit sector, and 19 percent find careers in education (Swarthmore College Career Services 2013). According to this data, fifty-five percent of Swarthmore’s graduates are employed in a common good career in the non-profit or education sector, and more may be employed in a for-profit common good position. Williams College, located in Massachusetts, reports that half of the 2013 graduating class was employed by early summer, with 53 percent employed in the private sector, 37 percent in the non-profit sector, and 9 percent in the public sector (Williams College Career Center). While it is difficult to be sure that these colleges’ career statistics were gathered in such a way
as to offer an accurate comparison, it is no doubt striking to compare the different paths that graduates take. Of course, an extensive comparison of many more liberal arts colleges would offer a more informative data set, but this brief comparison provides an interesting starting point.

Earlier I suggested that long-term commitments to social responsibility and service, rather than one-time volunteer engagements, would serve as a better gauge of whether or not Middlebury students developed a personal ethic of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership during their four year at Middlebury College. I suggest that one’s choice of career is an excellent example of a concrete, long-term commitment one makes that reflects their principles. The data presented here suggest that less than one sixth of Middlebury’s graduates pursue a so-called career in the common good. Instead of demonstrating a commitment to socially responsible careers, Middlebury graduates pursue careers in finance, banking, and consulting that reinforce class hierarchies and inequality, and consolidate ever more power and privilege in the hands of the few. And even if these the finance, banking, and consulting industries claim a commitment to corporate social responsibility, I wish to recall Fleming and Jones’ caution that CSR may be more nothing more than “an empty gesture” towards ethics in business (2013). If neo-liberal capitalism is “intrinsically anti-social,” and the majority of Middlebury graduates enter the for-profit world, it would seem that the career choices of most Middlebury graduates blatantly contradict any commitment to social responsibility (Fleming and Jones 2013).
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Middlebury College professes itself to be a place that allows for exceptional academic and character development. At Middlebury, it is said that students learn to be engaged, ethical leaders; students will be challenged to solve the most pressing social and environmental issues of our time; students will be asked to ponder the hard questions; after four years, each student will possess a highly developed ethic of personal social responsibility; all students will share in a deep commitment to service; student will strive to work in pursuit of the common good. These lofty goals are admirable, but are they a reality? This research has sought to determine whether the ideological context of Middlebury College serves to cultivate a commitment to social responsibility and service, and a desire to be an agent of change in its students, or whether it instead reinforces the status quo, bestowing additional privileges upon the elite and furthering economic disparities. Specifically, I asked whether Middlebury students emerge with an awareness of and desire to address environmental issues, social injustices and inequalities, and systemic problems, or whether they emerge with a desire to preserve or improve their own social status.

I began with an exploration of the ideology of Middlebury College. Institutional ideologies shape individual ideologies and, ultimately, the principles students are taught. In order to understand whether the ideological context of the College inspires a commitment to social responsibility, service, and social change in its students, I sought out an understanding of the ideology of Middlebury through an analysis of the college’s ‘rhetoric of recruitment.’
This rhetoric tells consumers not only what type of institution is offered, but also what type of student is produced. I suggest that different types of students, or individuals, are produced through a process of ideological formation. Thus, a college’s ‘rhetoric of recruitment’ can be understood as the means through which an institution articulates its ideology. In particular, I suggest that the mission statement, which serves as the guiding force behind all that a college does, represents the most concise description of an institution’s ideology. Based on my analysis of the Middlebury College mission statement, which suggests that all students will learn and develop the fundamental elements of an ethic of social responsibility, I suggest that Middlebury claims an ideology of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership.

However, I propose that this alleged ideology of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership may be more of a morally attractive marketing ploy than an ideological reality. I hypothesize that Middlebury College’s ideology is far more ambiguous, allowing class reproduction and continued consolidation of social, political, and economic capital in the hands of the elite to occur alongside a tentative consideration of the importance of social responsibility. A commitment to social responsibility, service, and ethical leadership can be found embedded within Middlebury’s ideology, as can a belief in the meritocracy, the “American Dream,” and the power of individual. In reality, Middlebury College promotes an ideology of individualism, in which hard work, personal success, and competition in pursuit of any goal trumps a commitment to working in pursuit of the common good.

That a discrepancy exists between the alleged and experienced ideology of Middlebury is what makes the College’s ideology so powerful. This discrepancy means
that the ideology is unidentifiable as property of the elite. The perfect ideology, it
disguises the principles of the ruling class within an ideology that seems to compel
society to work in service to all. Middlebury’s alleged ideology of global enviro-social
responsibility and leadership co-opts the language and principles of the masses to claim a
commitment to radical, progressive, social change. The College uses language that
suggests it belongs to the ninety-nine percent instead of the one percent. But, would an
ideology of social change serve the interests of Middlebury College? Would the College
really be so eager to call for a disruption of the status quo when it is such systems that
allows for an elite institution, such as Middlebury, to exist? What purpose would it serve
to teach the children of the elite to fight the very system that, thanks to a widening wealth
gap, and increasing power and privilege consolidated in the hands of the few, allows
them to attend Middlebury College? As an elite, private liberal arts institution,
Middlebury benefits handsomely from neoliberal capitalism, charging a comprehensive
fee of over $57,000 in 2013, and raising over $42 million dollars in alumni donations in
2012 (Middlebury College 2013; Collins 2013). What makes Middlebury College’s
ideology so powerful is that the principles of a ruling class are so beautifully disguised
within the discourse of the general populous.

By conducting a brief survey and in-depth personal interviews with five
Middlebury seniors, graduating in February 2014, I was able to shed light on the ways in
which a particular institutional context and ideology shapes the beliefs, values, and
choices of individuals. The responses provided by my five participants confirmed my
hypothesis that although the institution emphasizes social responsibility and service as
central to its mission, its ambiguous ideological context fails to create an environment
that demands action and commitment on the part of the students. Instead, Middlebury’s ideology of individualism allows students to choose to disengage from issues of power, privilege, inequality, injustice, and allows students to resist making any sort of concrete commitment to social responsibility and service.

As the students describe it, Middlebury College serves as a neutral facilitator, allowing students a great deal of individual independence in what they choose to pursue both inside and outside the classroom. While students explained that Middlebury provides ample optional, extracurricular means through which students can engage with social responsibility and service, they appreciated the relatively “unbiased approach” that the College takes regarding various social and environmental issues. Certain majors, such as Environmental Studies and Sociology/Anthropology, may offer opportunities for an academics-based exploration of social and environmental issues, but overall, the choice to engage is understood to be entirely individual. As students tell it, there is a distinct divide between the people who choose to ‘care’ and those who do not; it seems that those who choose not care are the majority, constituting a large, “apathetic middle.”

Yet, students demonstrate a self-awareness that suggests they believe a commitment to social responsibility, service, and ethical leadership is an element of the ideal human character. Students worried that they would appear “soulless” if they said they did not care; they worried that their choice to go into finance would be interpreted as “slightly unethical or immoral.” The ultimate goal for some would be to find a career in which they could do good in the world by doing well for themselves financially. Of course, students explain that many others, used to luxurious lives of wealth and
indulgence, are never asked to consider their privilege and never consider how they might use their privilege and education to make the world a better place.

What do these student responses tell us about the ideological context of Middlebury College, and whether or not Middlebury fulfills its mission to educate the next generation of agents of positive, social change? As evidenced by the students interviewed and the careers choices of Middlebury graduates, the large majority of Middlebury students seem to be choosing not to ‘care.’ The majority of students do not enroll in majors that promote social responsibility, they do not pursue long-term extracurricular activities that demand a commitment to service or activism, and they do not choose careers in the common good. As students describe it, this is the fault of the individual.

I wish to challenge this notion. To recall, individuals are inclined to believe themselves to be rational, independent actors, but the theory of new institutionalism suggests that individuals are significantly influenced and constrained by the institutions they interact with (Ingram and Clay 2000). If students, educated and influenced by the ideology of the College, are choosing not to ‘care,’ we must understand that the institution shapes this choice. Perhaps by relegating opportunities to learn about and engage with social and environmental issues to the optional, extracurricular sphere, Middlebury College sends the message that these issues are not particularly important. Perhaps the fact that a social responsibility or social justice requirement remains absent from the College’s academic distribution requirements suggests to students that they need not learn about them. Perhaps inviting banks and consulting agencies to recruit on campus allows students to understand these as attractive, acceptable careers to pursue.
However inconsequential these institutional decisions may seem, it cannot be denied that
the ideology of the institution structures the choices individuals make, and Middlebury
students are socialized in a space that upholds self-serving values and actions as normal
and correct.

As evidenced by the student responses and careers choices of Middlebury
graduates, I suggest that the dominant ideology of Middlebury is one of individualism.
This ideology, built upon the narratives of the meritocracy and the ‘American Dream,’
explains success and inequality in society as a product of individual merit rather than a
product of systemic inequality. Students claim an interest in social and environmental
issues, but fail to demonstrate a concrete commitment to educating themselves about or
working to address these issues. I suggest that this is because the very idea of a
meritocracy discourages social responsibility, or any form of altruistic behavior. If each
individual is understood to be an independent, rational actor, capable of achieving great
success if they merit it, there is no incentive to help others – if someone has failed it is
because they were not deserving of success. So, instead of working in pursuit of the
common good, Middlebury students emphasize the importance of personal, professional
development, and overwhelmingly choose careers in finance, banking, and consulting.

Students may believe that Middlebury maintains an “unbiased” position because
the ideology of the school reflects the dominant ideologies of the nation as a whole, but
this does not connote neutrality. An ideology of individualism structures an
understanding of a society in which structural inequality does not exist. It co-opts the
“pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” language of the working classes, and disguises the
unearned privileges of the elite as earned successes. This is may be a familiar ideology,
but it is not neutral. That students understand an ideology of global enviro-social responsibility and leadership as biased simply suggests that this is structuring set of principles not yet widely accepted and embraced by society.

Of course, the ideologies of individualism, meritocracy, and the ‘American Dream’ are not unique to Middlebury, but form much of the ideological base of the United States as a nation. These ideologies are institutionalized, causing widespread reproduction of inequality, injustice, and social hierarchy. These ideologies and their social consequences are so normalized that we, as a society, rarely question them. Yet, I challenge us to envision a different society, one in which the principles of social responsibility, service, and ethical leadership are held up as the dominant ideologies of the United States.

I have focused my critique on Middlebury College because one’s college years are an incredibly formative time; the experiences, lessons, values, and connections that one develops throughout college will inform the rest of their life. It is a time in which one is allowed unbounded freedom to explore their intellectual, creative, and ethical minds. Middlebury College recognizes the importance of the college years, claiming that its “liberal arts curriculum that will challenge you for the rest of your life. As one might expect from any elite, liberal arts institution, Middlebury offers its consumers “four years of intellectual and personal growth” that will “prepare students to meet the challenges of responsible citizenship in a complex, changing world.” It is suggested that each individual whose name is printed on a Middlebury College diploma will have learned to embody this “responsible citizenship” by demonstrating a commitment to ethical leadership, social responsibility, environmental stewardship, service, and engagement in
a rapidly changing global society. The grandiose goals are certainly not easily met, yet Middlebury demonstrates a commitment to fulfilling their mission. As the Office of Planning and Assessment states, its mission is “to say with confidence—and show with evidence—that at Middlebury, we provide an education that is consonant with our mission.” I hope that my research has challenged us to consider whether or not Middlebury College can say with confidence and show with evidence that it fulfills its mission. Middlebury College has the capacity to create powerful agents of positive social change, and I hope someday the curriculum and culture of the institution truly reflect this mission.
APPENDIX I. SURVEY

Name:___________________________________
Graduation Year:_______________
Major(s):_________________________________
Minor(s):_________________________________

If you have secured a job after graduation, please provide the title of your position and name of your employer:__________________________________________________

What economic background/class do you consider yourself to be a part of?
___________________________________________________________

Are you graduating with debt?
__________________________

• Do you think Middlebury teaches its students to be committed to service? (yes/no answer is fine, explain if you wish)
________________________________________________________________________

• Do you think Middlebury students emerge with an awareness of and desire to address social injustices and economic inequalities? (yes/no answer is fine, explain if you wish)
________________________________________________________________________

• Do you think Middlebury has a responsibility to teach its students to be agents of positive change? (yes/no answer is fine, explain if you wish)
________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX II. INTERVIEW SCRIPT

I. Personal Background

- Did you grow up with less than enough, enough, or more than enough?
- When you think about your status in the world, do you tend to compare yourself to those who have more than you, or those who have less?
- How do you explain your family’s success?
- Do you expect to have more, less, or the same level of affluence in your adult life as what you grew up with?

II. Personal Values and Principles

- How important is professional success to your version of the ideal life?
- How important is it that you “make the world a better place?” What would that look like to you?
- Do you think it is the responsibility of those who have more to help those who have less?

III. Choosing Middlebury, Learning Middlebury, Acting Middlebury

- What particular attributes of Middlebury attracted you to the school?
- How would you define Middlebury’s core values?
- Do you feel like your values and the values of the institution are in line with each other?
- You are now a senior – what factors will most influence your decision about what you do after graduation?
- What is the most useful thing Middlebury has given you? (an idea, a perspective, a skill, a friendship, etc)
- After three years at Middlebury, do you spend more or less time thinking about social and economic inequalities and injustices in our world?
- After three full years at Middlebury, how frequently do you act to address the social and economic inequalities and injustices in our world? (community service, volunteering, etc)
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