

# Learning How to Live

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At the start of my short career at a community college near my hometown, I began to come across the term 'liberal education' more frequently. Over and over again I heard it, with different connotations and from separate mouths with differing agendas. But it was just a pair of words; it meant only what the people saying it wanted it to, and even though they got louder the closer I came to a liberal college campus, I didn't really listen. Until reflecting on it now for the purposes of this essay, I didn't realize it held so much personal meaning for me.

Liberal education isn't about the words in the phrase, or the classroom, or even the professors-- however one may feel about that. The liberal education offered by my university is present in the entire atmosphere of the place- and that education does a wonderful thing of massive importance. It exposes students to, and offers them the chance to join, a community- at both a local and global level. In so doing, UWSP is also giving me the tools I need to better understand *myself* through a series of social, civic, and inward investigations- tools I can use to build a life and to become a better member of the society I'll enter after college.

Stevens Points' campus is designed to foster the growth of its students' intellectual and practical skills. It's actually quite sneaky- all the different buildings, offices, clubs and theaters are just a short distance from where students live, in an ultra-concentrated little city full of action. I think of this campus as a crash-course in "Living With Others". In this context, "others" takes a variety of meanings. I refer to my roommate, the first person I've ever lived with outside of my immediate family. Suddenly I am trapped (to some degree) in a room with a person from a rather different walk of life from my own. It's quite an experience, sharing oneself with a

stranger in this way- let alone the rest of the community in the East wing, the entire floor, and ultimately a whole building! There's no recognizing every footfall outside of one's door, and it seems impossible to know every face and name- and this is ultimately for the best. Comfort in a community, especially a big one, is essential to build. Outside of the family nest, and outside of the college, is another community that students will one day join- and doing so feebly is only one option. In a dorm community, students receive a chance to interact with so many different types of people and to gain confidence in doing so, like I'm working on- it's shocking, the amount of inquiry you build up inside when you're around so many different kinds of people. There are all of these "others" to get to know; and to let them get to know you as well, you need to communicate with them.

In "others", I refer also to my coworkers at the Knutzen Hall front desk. I'm a receptionist there and I've made many friends in this way, through teamwork as an employee body and through communication with those who pass the desk on the way to their rooms. Switching shifts, having patience with a coworker who has a shift right after class and must rush across campus while I wait late at the desk- these are experiences in connecting with the people one is around, instead of just sharing a proximity with them. Here is the difference between being nearby and being a neighbor. And even those who aren't neighbors are invited to interact. Everyone on campus is encouraged to affiliate with one another through a variety of forums.

This is how UWSP is teaching me what it is to participate in the rapidly globalizing world. This course I like to think of as "Living Among Everyone", because

now more than ever in the world it seems as if every country touches. We don't need to be far from those around us. And the campus I live on immerses me in reminders of how possible it is to get involved with all kinds of people- an unimaginable number of them. Whereas the physical structure of the campus encourages involvement by keeping events close at hand, it's the programs that are actually offered here that promote personal and social responsibility among the student body.

UWSP offers such a variety of programs that it has to throw *fairs* to promote them- not to mention the constantly wallpapered bulletin boards all over campus! Students here can volunteer all over town, find employment, join multicultural or career-oriented clubs and organizations staffed by helpful, wildly varying kinds of people-and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Campus injects an element of fun and an aura of support into things that students of any age might otherwise view as foreign or imposing- the gaining of intercultural knowledge, the familiarization with civic engagement, and the inspiration to ethical action. As the Vice President of SPAFCS, I'm gaining leadership and organizational experience, as well as dipping my toes into the waters of service learning and volunteerism. A couple buildings over, as a training Writing Consultant at the Tutoring Learning Center I'm gaining skills for lifelong learning. Likewise, those who seek my help with their writing, and those who support my organization, are enriching their lives and establishing a charitable, proactive habit they can keep with for a lifetime. This is a hallmark of a liberal education- the free access to information that binds so many people together in today's world. Even informal situations like an ice cream social in the DUC, a blood

drive, or the Day of the Dead arts exhibit in the Noel Fine Arts Center provide the opportunity to comfortably build lifelong habits in cultural appreciation and socialization- and I'm all over that like butter on toast, especially the blood drives.

And it's in these accumulating, small ways that the atmosphere of Stevens Point has made me feel welcome, and given me a part to play in a local- and global- community. For me personally, one of the most rewarding parts of this is the slow realization that by becoming a part of this all, I'm fulfilling a lot of internal roles that I've neglected in the past. In those I help, I can see my own worth- in volunteering, or the practice I'm getting toward my future as an educator. Nurturing my ability to sympathize and empathize with others is also helping me to see myself- and to like, even love myself more than I ever have before. I'm synthesizing all these skills from inside and outside of classes- being comfortable around a roommate I'm just getting to know and love, socializing and forming bonds with classmates and coworkers, taking the organization of a bake sale from SPAFCS and turning it into effective time-management skills across the board... the list goes on.

It's amazing what this campus has done for me, and in every way I'd like to pay it forward. As a future educator, wife, mother, neighbor and friend to many I'd like to promote the same concepts through example or education that UWSP instilled in me. Living with others, curiously and communicatively; living among the world in a global community, engaging myself culturally and civically; and using the skills I've gained in loving and helping others to love and take care of myself.