Envisioning a Rhetoric That Binds Us

On January 17, 2017 a group of students, faculty, staff, and administrators gathered to discuss the status and future of rhetoric at Middlebury. Participants were asked, “How would Middlebury be different if every student were skilled in the art of public expression, and what would it take to get there?” The next day, a second group expanded the conversation to include the question, “What if the campus were a place for the courageous exchange of ideas, and what would it take to get there?”

The Vision:

Working definition: Rhetoric is the art of public expression. We use it to move an audience to a new idea, decision, or action. While it encompasses the skills of writing, speaking and visual communication, its study and practice center on the beliefs and values of audiences. It requires and rewards a focus on others. That is why rhetoric, despite its power to divide, is essential to civic health and to building a sense of common purpose.

As an institution, Middlebury should have a global reputation for rhetorical openness, with students and faculty who speak and listen freely without rancor. The College should be known for its rigorous, objective study of rhetorical theory and practice.

A rhetorically-empowered campus could feature the following attributes:

- Applicants attracted to a college renowned for civic discourse and the free exchange of ideas.
- A first-year experience that includes the study and practice of rhetoric (written and oral) and abundant opportunities to participate in extracurricular speaking programs.
- A four-year course of study that features “Rhetoric Across The Curriculum,” ending with a capstone presentation.
- A communal space run by students for storytelling, debate, facilitated dialogue, and oratorical games; where students flock to listen and be heard.
- An apolitical center for rhetorical research that includes the study of digital media.

A Middlebury graduate should be recognizable by:

- Ability to hold an audience’s attention through the compelling use of words or images.
- Capacity to recognize logical fallacies, appeals to tribalism, and other forms of manipulation.
- Skill in speaking comfortably before a group.
- Ability to lead productive dialogue and engender change by empowering others.
- Facility to engage deeply and disagree civilly.
Participants in the conversation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Department/Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August Hutchinson</td>
<td>History '16.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austin Stevens</td>
<td>Env. Studies '18</td>
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<td>Dana Yeaton</td>
<td>Theatre</td>
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<td>David Stoll</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
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<td>Erin Quinn</td>
<td>Director of Athletics</td>
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<tr>
<td>I. Brancoli-Busdraghi</td>
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<td>Jay Heinrichs</td>
<td>Prof. of the Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jessica Teets</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josh Espy</td>
<td>Architecture '17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kathryn Morse</td>
<td>History</td>
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<td>Liz Robinson</td>
<td>Assoc. Dean for CEC</td>
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<td>Mariah Levin</td>
<td>Psychology '16.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Orten</td>
<td>Dean, Spiritual/Relig. Life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michelle McCauley</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly Anderson</td>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nia Robinson</td>
<td>Undeclared '19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nikolina Dobreva</td>
<td>Film &amp; Media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pieter Broucke</td>
<td>Director of the Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shawna Shapiro</td>
<td>Writing, Linguistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Susan Baldridge</td>
<td>Provost</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tabitha Mueller</td>
<td>Geography '18</td>
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Their written responses:

“Rhetorical openness” to “the beliefs and values of others”

“Learn to listen with an open mind (i.e. without immediately thinking of a rebuttal), to truly take in what someone else says.”

“It would look more diverse.”

“Diverse audiences coming together.”

“Students need to learn how to listen.”

“Major differences and clashes in ideologies.”

“Create empathy [and] build listening skills.”

“Everyone appears more unique in ... opinions.”

“[Be] open to the opportunity to have ... ideas and beliefs challenged.”

“Students questioning each other's ... values.”

Space to “speak and listen freely without rancor”

“A pit or space where students rule and can post anything they want (as long as it is civil) without fear.”

“[Students should not] silence those with whom they disagree. [They should be] more able to challenge faculty, administrators, [and] invited speakers in direct, skilled, productive ways without fear of being silenced or attacked.”

“Students don't know how to disagree.”

“Fear of speaking one's mind, associated with ... a lack of practice.”

“Can we practice disagreeing?”

“Fear of upsetting personal relationships with classmates; [students find it] difficult to communicate/disagree without being afraid of seeming confrontational.”

“Fear of upsetting personal relationships with classmates; [students find it] difficult to communicate/disagree without being afraid of seeming confrontational.”
“Every student should be confident when standing in front of a room of people and expressing their ideas.”

“Marginalized students could voice ideas with more ... confidence.”

“Confident students presenting, sharing ideas.”

“Each student [should feel] confident to participate in discussions.”

“Stop walking on eggshells.”

“People do not wish to stand out against any majority especially at a place like Middlebury where the major side is obvious and not the most tolerant.”

“I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.”

“No one wants to be the recipient of: 'do you know how much your words hurt?’”

“Discomfort with argument ... is part of [the] culture ... There's a strain of wanting to go with the crowd, avoid friction, be liked.”

“Co-curricular culture: TedX, Oratory Now, Parker Merrill ... Debate”

**“Rhetoric across the curriculum”**

“Faculty need training.”

“Faculty training.”

“Faculty [should] ask for assistance.”

“Marginalized students ... are often silent in class”

“Students [should] engage presenters rather than remain silent.”

“One barrier is administrative backing for therapeutic-based concepts such as trigger warnings, safe space, [and] microaggression that encourage people to censor themselves.”

“[There is] uncertainty of college students and desire to belong [which cause self-censorship].”

“We need [a] greater frequency of higher quality public speaking events whose topics are manifestly relevant and valuable to audiences and which give students speaking opportunities (like the Middlebury MothUp).”

“[We need] more frequent debates on issues of social [and] political importance [as well as] better attendance at events that feature ... expression.”

“Integration of rhetoric in disparate experiences across campus [can be] reinforcing the skill, its need, and its importance.”

“Middlebury students don't know ... how to be okay with being wrong. “

“We ... need structures and assessment for development of rhetorical skills.”

“We should describe assessment in terms of oratory [and] giving feedback around this.”
“Rhetoric across the curriculum” (cont.)

“Pedagogy tends to stop at writing. Faculty have no examples of syllabi with speaking. At academic conferences, people just read papers.”

“Faculty [have] concerns about their own speaking [and have] unfamiliarity with coaching speakers.”

“[There is a] fear of speaking among students due to nerves and apathy and lack of practice, and a lack of ability among faculty to give skilled feedback.”

“Persuade faculty that rhetoric is the foundation of liberal arts.”

“[We need] enticements for teachers to include presentations that are graded [and] support for those who want to try.”

“Start with the ideas of listening, deliberation, [and] critical inquiry as part of [a] ‘liberal arts skill set’ to ‘sell’ rhetoric to the faculty and students”

“Faculty and staff [need to see rhetoric] as a necessary and valuable skill.”

“[We need] a sense among faculty and staff that this is a necessary and valuable skill.”

“Make [rhetorical skill] an expectation ... that all incoming freshmen ... look forward to.”

“Students should be told at the beginning that this is a skill they will be learning - improving - growing over four years.”

“[We need] dedicated public speaking classes.”

“We should invite faculty to explicitly consider how one or more of their classes encourages or teaches skill building in this area.”

“[Classes] with only lectures, time constraints, [and] no formal sessions for students presenting to get coached [impede rhetorical learning].”

“Better integration of rhetorical education and practice in the classroom.”

“There can be roleplay in the class - make an argument to or for Group X [to] get the imagination up and therefore the enthusiasm.”

“[We should have] courses in the art of skillful public expression [and] a center of expertise.”

“A curriculum [should] bring oral presentation into every course, and a capstone rhetorical project in senior year.”

“We emphasize writing over public speaking much [too] heavily ... Public expression needs to be treated on a par with writing.”

“[We should be] reshaping what we have instead of [adding] a lot of extra, new initiatives.”

“[We need rhetorical] skills taught to all students ... a capstone requirement, [and] rhetoricians conducting leading-edge research and guiding rhetoric majors.”
“Rhetoric across the curriculum” (cont.)

“More time [in] each syllabus to engage in deliberation.”

“[We need] access to education and practice of rhetoric.”

“[Establish] a center where students and faculty can play with the art, exercises, games, and safe debate.”

“[We have] a lack of general understanding of the power of rhetoric. Many do not see the point of learning the skill.”

“A college speaking requirement.”

“A Middlebury graduate should be recognizable...”

“Middlebury graduates [should] gain a reputation as ... effective in the workplace, as agents of positive solutions [able] to illuminate shared vision [for] stakeholders. [This] will render them valued and sought-after team members.”

“The Middlebury graduate should be recognizable by [their] ability to disagree without anger, [their] skill in speaking before a group without notes, [their] capacity to recognize manipulation in various forms, [their] leadership among teams, [and their] facility to hold an audience's attention.”

“Graduates would be prepared to write a letter to the paper - respond to a blog - speak up at a public event. Thus a wider variety of opinions and ideas would be expressed.”

“Graduates are known for their oratorical skills.”

“[We should have] students who are well-prepared for life post-college”

“Have Middlebury’s reputation be for public speaking”

“We would prepare students with a life skill.”

“Ability to lead productive dialogue and ... empower others”

“Work on understanding more of our own assumptions and biases as we find ... a way to work together [for] problem solving.”

“Students [should] lead conversation rather than protest others’ speech.”
“Ability to lead productive dialogue and ... empower others” (cont).

“Empower them to persuade each other and take collective action.”

“[We should be] supporting the development of rigorous logic [for] more sustained and productive conversations.”

“More students [should] speak up and share ideas in class and in other leadership roles.”

“Every student [should] be capable of ably and honestly speaking their minds and engaging with the ideas of others to create progress.”

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Robinson
Dana Yeaton

February 2017
Appendix:

Faculty-Adopted Learning Goals:

- College-wide Learning Goal #3: Demonstrate skill and sophistication in oral and written expression.

- FYS Learning Goal #3: to develop skills in widely accessible yet scholarly presentation (written and oral), involving observation, analysis, argumentation, research, and the use of sources.