

Testimonial: Middlebury College, Vermont

Back in 2019, when I was researching the different universities offered by FU's direct exchange program, Middlebury College instantly stood out as an obvious first choice for me. Having spent almost a year here, I can say, with great confidence, that I have not been disappointed by my decision to list it as such. Middlebury has enabled me to delve into different cultural opportunities, further myself academically as well as personally, and build lifelong relationships with co-students and faculty. Middlebury has far exceeded my expectations both as an academic institution and a community, and I will always be grateful to the FU committee for making this experience possible. As I am writing this testimonial in the month of June, I am located here still, where I will be working as a research assistant for the rest of the summer.

Middlebury College is located in west-central Vermont in the heart of Middlebury, a small New-England town with a population size of 9,000+ inhabitants. It has a total undergraduate enrollment of around 2,500 undergraduates, of which approximately 15% are international students. The campus spans 350 acres and is surrounded by scenic mountains and trails. The college also maintains extensive recreational and athletic space, which includes a golf course and a ski area. Located a ten-minute walk away from campus is the town with its handful of cafés, restaurants, and two supermarkets. For students, venturing into the village for a cup of coffee, or a stroll around the falls can serve as a much-needed break from the weekly stressors of academic life and the buzzing campus environment. The cost of food in Vermont is high, though this is something that you, for the most part, will be blissfully unaware of thanks to the meal plan. Middlebury has three all-you-can-eat dining halls and retail options such as the Wilson Café, Crossroads, and the Grille, where students frequently study and socialize during the week.

Middlebury is located in a transportation desert, meaning, you cannot really explore nearby areas without a car. Even just leaving campus requires a fair amount of planning. To get to and from the airport in Burlington, students have the option of either taking a bus that leaves twice daily, or a taxi that costs around \$100.00. During most major campus breaks, the college offers bus service to Burlington International Airport, New York, and Boston. A new Amtrak station is scheduled to open in Middlebury later this summer with a train service originating in Penn Station, Manhattan. What I missed the most, apart from having basic mobility, was interacting with people from different age groups and backgrounds. Middlebury's student body is fairly homogenous in spite of the international students that go here, and many of them are fresh out of high school. Nevertheless,

the lack of distractions allowed me to focus on my work and to become more close-knit with the friends I made on campus. Besides, there is no shortage of events and activities to keep students occupied throughout the year. Day trips and excursions can typically be made with different clubs and organizations.

The academic workload is high, but manageable, as long as you put in the hours. Most of my time here was spent in the library. Many professors in the humanities emphasize text production, and the speed at which we were expected to churn out material and plow through novels in some of my classes was remarkable. Nonetheless, it is the rigor and excellence of the academics that allow Middlebury students to truly evolve. Students are competitive, but they mostly compete with themselves. Their drive and industriousness are nonetheless infectious. As far as academic writing goes, my professors were not very concerned with us writing in a “correct” academic style; students elaborating on their ideas and expressing them in a compelling manner was more important. Good grades are easy to get, as long as you fulfill the course requirements and contribute to class discussions. With that said, the pressures of academic life at Middlebury are real, and things such as sleep and physical exercise are easily forsaken if you do not actively carve out time from your schedule.

Students are on average expected to enroll in three to four courses per semester. In J-Term, the month-long winter semester, it is only possible to register for one. I started by registering for five, which I would not recommend to anyone, as maintaining four courses is challenging enough. People who take five tend to make sacrifices in terms of the quality of their work and, by extension, their grades. Or, they choose their courses strategically, so as to balance them out against each other. Students may drop courses until the end of the fifth week, and new ones can be added until the second. After a week of running around like a headless chicken, I decided to drop my fifth class. If there is a particular course that sparks your curiosity, it is worth emailing the person teaching it to flag your interest. Instructors often reserve spots for exchange students even if a course is technically full.

One of the major perks of attending a small, private liberal arts college is the relationships you get to cultivate with faculty. At Middlebury, the mentor function of instructors transcends their role as researchers, which seemed like an alien notion to me at first. Students are encouraged to visit professors during office hours regardless of whether they are enrolled in one of their classes. For me, the student-professor relationships have, without a doubt, been one of the best parts of this

entire experience. Not only did I get to study under the mentorship of scholars who are at the top of their fields, but I also got to know some of them on a personal basis. Words are not enough to express the deep sense of gratitude and admiration I feel toward these people, who have changed my life for the better. If you are coming to Middlebury, make sure to take advantage of the office hours to get to know your professors better.

The limits of what you can explore and accomplish at Middlebury, whether it be in the academic realm or beyond, are indeed very few. As platitudinous as it may sound, you get out of it what you put in. My time here has been ripe with opportunities and connections. Apart from acquiring a position as a research assistant, I got to try my hand at journalism by writing for the student-run weekly newspaper. I also took a creative writing class taught by an established author, which has inspired me to pursue fiction writing. As a Middlebury student, you have endless resources at your disposal, all you got to know is where to look for them, and ask.