When I started my college search, I was looking for a small liberal arts school where I could do a lot of reading and writing, but I didn’t want to settle on any one thing about which to read or write. I’m a musician, but I also enjoy chemistry and physics. I like to talk about theology, but I love to set aside time for reading poetry and studying languages.

In my sophomore year of high school, a family friend suggested that I look at St. John’s College. I requested information from the admissions office, and they mailed me a program description unlike anything else I had encountered in my college search. The first page of the booklet they sent was covered with the names of some of history’s greatest thinkers and writers. Flipping through the brochure, I learned that St. John’s uses a Great Books curriculum, which means that the classes are all about reading and discussing seminal works of the Western world. The journey begins with Homer’s *Iliad* and continues all the way into the 20th century. In that list of Great Books, I found everything I wanted to study: poetry, science, music, philosophy, and much more.

At St. John’s, we don’t have majors or departments, and every student takes the same courses during the undergraduate program. Our professors are called *tutors* because they don’t profess; they lead seminar-style discussions, and every class starts with a question about a text. We don’t take pencil-and-paper tests at the college, but there are oral examinations—which are exciting and engaging opportunities for students to talk one-on-one with our tutors about challenging ideas. I have walked away from every exam at this school having learned and thought about something I had never before considered.

The first year at St. John’s is an exciting whirlwind of getting used to our unique way of talking about the Great Books. Carefully reading great texts of the arts and sciences is a difficult thing to do, but as I continued through the course of study, I started to recognize profound connections between thoughts and ideas. What I learned about ratios and numbers in the freshman mathematics tutorial reappeared in a study of tones in sophomore music. Thoughts about chemical elements from freshman laboratory popped up again in senior year with quantum physics. Questions from the Platonic dialogues that we read early in the program are always making their way into conversations that we have in seminar, whether we’ve moved on to the Bible or to the U.S. Constitution.

When you read the Great Books, you realize that the thinkers who have moved history started with questions about their world. And questions are the way into the conversation at St. John’s. What was Achilles thinking on the night before his battle with Hector? What is a human soul? How does a composer create a melody? What is happiness? Was Socrates the best philosopher? Do Newton’s laws really work? The questions grow into theories and philosophies, and new thinkers take up new questions gleaned from the intellectual harvest of their ancestors.

When I graduate, I will receive a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts. This could be the foundation for many different careers, and graduates go on to lead all sorts of interesting lives. I’ve spent the past few summers writing and directing theater productions, working at a non-profit for educational policy, and researching astrophysics as an intern at the U.S. Naval Observatory. My education continues to open doors for me, and I owe a great deal to my classmates and tutors at St. John’s. Community is at the heart of our ideas, and ideas are at the heart of our community. In reading the Great Books, discovering connections, and asking questions, I have learned to value the people that make the world such an interesting place.

Chelsea Adams is a senior at St. John’s College in Annapolis, MD. She hails from New Concord, OH, and she intends to pursue graduate study in educational philosophy and policy. She spends her free time writing, making music, and helping out with her church’s youth group.

---

*Great Books, Great Education* by Chelsea Adams

Learn more about St. John’s College at http://sjca.edu.

Nov/Dec 2011