

SHIMER COLLEGE EFFECTS ON STUDENTS: A RETROSPECTIVE CASE STUDY

by

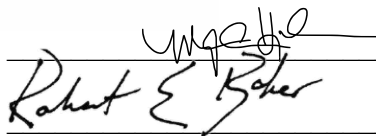
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of
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Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Susan J. Aitel, without whose regular cajoling I would never have completed it.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would never have been completed without the dedication of my chair, Dr. Jeannie Brown Leonard, who took on my project midway through my work and pushed me to keep working, even after she moved from George Mason University to Kansas State. She also continued encouraging me to make it perfect and not just okay.

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Debby Kermer in the George Mason University library helped me over the "learning hump" so I could use NVivo to facilitate my research analysis.

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I would never have completed this without my wife, Susan, and her regular reminders to stop playing with whatever gizmo whose repair distracted me and get back to work on this paper. And this would never have been as readable without her suggestions and comments throughout my writing process.

My editor, Colleen Spears, went far beyond fixing my text to be APA compliant in the middle of transitioning from APA 6 to APA 7. She identified areas of my text that were unclear or just plain needed something else.

And to my friends and family, who thought I was using this as an excuse to ignore them—it's all over now so I can't use that excuse.

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Abstract

SHIMER COLLEGE EFFECTS ON STUDENTS: A RETROSPECTIVE CASE STUDY

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This qualitative study explored the effects of attending Shimer College, a small Midwestern Great Books school. The research design was a case study in which I interviewed 16 people who attended Shimer between 1960 and 1976. During the interviews, I tried to learn what aspects of their experiences as Shimer students affected them during their time at Shimer and through their subsequent lives. Most studies on the effects of college on students cover specific domains such as social activism or religiosity and do not address periods beyond the first decade after completing their education. This study used open questions and encouraged the participants to speak on any topics they chose. Working with participants at this stage of their lives also provided a retrospective look at what they considered important decades after the experience.

After coding the interview transcripts, a descriptive framework guided my analysis and produced five categories. The five categories included: why the participants attended Shimer, the campus physical environment, the curriculum, academics beyond

the curriculum, and post-Shimer outcomes. I then used an iterative process in which I consolidated or restructured some emerging themes to focus them. The eight resulting themes are: Push–Pull (early entrants attended Shimer as an escape while others were attracted to the school’s program), ideal vision (the location, campus, and size), learning how to learn, the curricular interconnectedness, relationships with faculty and with other students, academics outside the classroom, increased self-confidence among the alumni, and the flexible skill sets they used in the workplace. The findings point to aspects of college that mattered to the participants and insights as to the long-term effects of those experiences. These findings inform implications, which include recommendations linked to class size and integration across the curriculum. The analysis concludes with recommendations for future research.

I. Introduction

April 1966 was a month with some important “lasts” and “firsts” for me. It was a month in which I participated in my last high school play and my last cast party with friends I had made over my four years in the drama club. It was the month in which I turned 17 and I saw the last of my junior driver’s license with its restrictions. It marked a time when I could envision seeing the last of my high school when I walked across the stage at commencement in a few weeks.

April 1966 was also a month of firsts as I took my first airplane flight from Philadelphia to visit Shimer College in Mount Carroll, Illinois, one of the two colleges to which I had been accepted. Shimer had become my choice more by default than intent. My high school college guidance counselor suggested a few small experimental colleges that might accept me given my poor grades, two of which accepted me. A high school friend and his mother had visited the other college to which I had been accepted, and in the secret world of inter-mother communications, our mothers had determined that school to be inappropriate for us because of the long-haired, sandal-wearing, beer-drinking, funny-cigarette smoking students they had observed. This led to my visit to Shimer, which had recently been the subject of a glowing nearly full-page article in *Time* magazine, a resource as trusted as a fellow mother, included in Appendix A (“Unknown, Unsung and Unusual,” 1963).

My visit to Shimer College deviated from the norm because the admissions office neglected to have someone meet me, leaving me stranded at the closed train station on the outskirts of Mount Carroll (population 2,000 in the middle of Illinois cornfields) at 11 p.m. on a dark Sunday night. Just before I was about to start walking toward the nearest light in hopes of finding some humanity, a former Shimer student came by the station and offered to help me get to campus after he delivered the Sunday *New York Times* copies that he had picked up from the train. He left me at his house while he delivered the papers—a house with colored lights all over and bead curtains on every doorway—and a nude female who wandered through the living room to introduce herself. My new “friend” finally returned and drove me to campus, where he found someone with an empty bed I could use for the night.

Upon awakening the next morning to my first daylight sighting of the campus, I was pleasantly surprised to see what looked like a stereotypical movie set college campus: a half-dozen older red brick buildings surrounding a rectangular grass-filled quad sprinkled with trees. I found the admissions office, whose staff apologized for my being left alone the night before and chatted about plans for the day. The person there arranged for me to attend a couple of classes that day, gave me a pass to get food in the dining hall, and arranged better sleeping accommodations for that night. And I was off to see the academic side of Shimer College, not sure what to expect.

Whatever expectations I might have had about college were shattered by the reality of a small room with a table surrounded by about 15 chairs. No teacher’s desk. No “head of the table”—just a table, a dozen or so students, and one older person seated

seemingly at random among the students. Fifty years later, I do not remember the subject, but I do remember the student engagement, as the teacher (or, as I learned later, the facilitator) asked a question about the material the students had been assigned and listened to the student responses as the students debated the topic. And the questions were not about facts, as would have been the case in high school, but about thoughts and opinions. The students might have been asked their opinions of Alexander Hamilton's arguments in the assigned *Federalist Papers*. They all jumped in, arguing about something I had previously considered uninteresting. That night I went with my "roommate" to a student lounge/snack bar and listened to other students discussing the merits of Heidegger and Nietzsche. This was a place that catered to the way I thought I could learn.

Upon returning home (after extending my stay to attend a dress rehearsal of their student spring play), I told my parents how much I liked the school. I somehow neglected to mention the challenges with my late-night arrival and the interesting house and its nude occupant. I described, instead, the classes and play I attended and how much I could learn there.

That fall saw me on my second ever flight, this time better organized, and matriculating at Shimer College. New students were required to arrive a week before classes began. I felt good about doing well enough in the placement tests to place out of Math but regretted not doing well enough in Hebrew or Latin to avoid the language requirement. The best part of the week was that it provided a low-stress period (no classes) during which I met my fellow new students (at 185, the second largest entering

class in Shimer's history) and learned about their guitar and bridge-playing skills. I still feel close to the friends I made that week (Shimer College, n.d.-c).

There were surprises, as might be expected. I discovered the costs of a Great Books curriculum: the books themselves. My first semester books cost \$75 (about \$750 in current money) for my three courses. I learned to eat new food, how to do laundry (including not waiting until I ran out of clean clothes), and how to share a room with bunk beds with a stranger.

The courses were as interesting as I recalled from my earlier visit. We had to read a book (or more) a week and write a paper almost every week for at least one class. Academically, one of the most important things I learned during my time at Shimer was that there were multiple ways to learn about various subjects. For example, in our science courses we learned how new scientific knowledge is discovered instead of just learning formulas. Instead of studying American history through wars and battles, we explored ideas that led to the United States Constitution, again by reading original works like the previously mentioned *Federalist Papers* and discussing the issues they addressed.

The classes at Shimer also helped me learn concepts more important than those explicitly covered. I learned that my thoughts about what we read and discussed were of equal value to those of the famous authors in the books and those of my classmates and instructors, if I could clearly defend them, teaching me that I was not dependent on others for knowledge. I also learned how to learn in new domains of knowledge, something that I applied regularly in later life as I taught myself the skills I needed as an information

technology professional, learning how to configure networks and servers before there were formal classes on those subjects.

Outside the classroom, I learned to get along with other people in a constrained environment, too small to disappear and hide from my mistakes. I learned that life in the big city in which I grew up was not necessarily the only way people could live. I learned that being in a small town in which I could walk from my dorm room to downtown in 10 minutes might actually be a good thing.

Attending Shimer College and spending several years in small-town America had a major impact on my life, but not necessarily in ways that most people perceive the college experience. Conversations with my classmates and others who attended Shimer during the 1960s and 1970s had led me to believe that they also felt as strongly about their experiences. This research was an attempt to identify what made that college experience so valuable and special.

Overview

Decisions about college attendance are probably among the most important choices facing adolescents: which college to attend, which major to choose, whether to live at home or on campus, even the basic choice to attend college. Much has been written about the effects of a college education (Astin, 1977, 1993; Choy & Bradburn, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), but all of these studies are very short term, with most investigating only until about 10 years after graduation. A college education should have life-changing and life-long effects; studies that cover only 10 years after graduation seem too short. Instead, I developed a narrowly focused and deeper study

covering a longer period—about 40 to 50 years. I interviewed a small group of people (16) who attended Shimer College, a small liberal arts college, in the 1960s and 1970s to learn from their decades-later reflections on their college experiences.

Possible College Attendance Effects

Every year about three million students graduate from high school in the United States and face some life-defining choices (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Will they go to college, enter the workforce, enter military service (a variant of joining the workforce but with substantive differences), or, for a select few, take a “gap” year after which they might be better prepared to make that decision? According to a recent study, in 2015 a substantial majority (about 70%) of recent graduates chose college and about 72% of the remainder entered the workforce. About 90% of those enrolled in college attended full-time and almost two-thirds of those were in 4-year institutions. Some attended residential schools and others lived at home while attending college (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Changes in the workplace have led to a need for a college education as preparation for almost any career (Cohn, 2011; Day & Newburger, 2002; P. Taylor et al., 2014). Even careers that, in the past, could be entered with no more than some experience and self-taught skills, such as being an auto mechanic, now require training to learn to diagnose problems in computerized systems. Whereas previous generations felt secure investing time and money in a college education and relying on an economy that would provide employment, the rising cost of college attendance coupled with a changing economy has led parents and students to focus more on postgraduation employment

prospects. The students and their parents accept the cost of college attendance because of the expected return; college graduates can earn salaries about 65% higher than people with only a high school diploma, even after factoring in the cost of college attendance (Cohn, 2011; Day & Newburger, 2002; *Learn More, Earn More*, 2020). Meanwhile, politicians and academics are engaged in a debate over the value of a college education that does more than impart the skills needed for that first job after graduation, choosing to ignore other potentially intangible benefits of college attendance. State-level politicians have seized on this topic as a rationale for further reductions in funding for public institutions if colleges persist in offering courses and programs not leading to “real” jobs that are in demand (Alvarez, 2012; Arcieri, 2014). It was interesting to learn from my interview participants how they applied to their jobs the non-career-specific skills they learned at Shimer.

College attendance is more than attending classes in your major, doing homework, and taking tests. For many students, attending college is the first time they may have been exposed to people with backgrounds different from their own, to drug use, to nonmarital sex, and to political activism (Astin, 1993). Students attending smaller colleges or those living away from home have more opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and to develop leadership skills (Astin, 1993; R. G. Barker, 1964). The college experience may result in a change to students’ paradigms for accepting and creating knowledge, one of the espoused goals of the Shimer College curriculum (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Belenky et al., 1997; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1999; Shimer College, 1966). These are some examples of ways in which college

attendance may affect students. I learned a great deal from my study participants about what factors had an impact on them as students as well as how their life trajectories may have been affected as a result of those college influences.

Topic-Specific Effects

Through my research, I learned how former Shimer College students from the 1960s and 1970s understand their experiences at Shimer. Answering this major question required that I also learn what aspects of their Shimer experience were remembered as being most salient to them when they were students and in what ways the participants' Shimer experiences influenced their lives since college.

Much has been written on the effect of a college education, the most thorough coverage being in two huge volumes that summarize many research discussions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Among other topics, these discussions address areas like financial rewards (and potential debt issues), development of short-term and lifelong relationships, development of job and learning skills, and employability. Despite their breadth, these studies cover only short-term effects and I will discuss them later. My research interest is instead focused on the long-term effects of student experiences at a single college as perceived by its graduates and others who attended that college. I also tried to satisfy my curiosity about how college attendance might have had a transformational effect extending beyond the job-specific skills taught in many career-oriented programs at other colleges today.

To explore my questions while maintaining a manageable research project, I interviewed a small group of former students (16) who attended Shimer College, a small

liberal arts college, between 1960 and 1976 in an attempt to leverage their now more mature perspectives to discuss their perceptions of their earlier education process. I selected Shimer College, a “Great Books college” that I attended for three years during that period, as the source of participants for my research. Although I am in contact with a sufficient number of Shimer alumni through Facebook, I tried to expand my group beyond those with the technical proficiency or interest in the use of social media. I was able to expand my pool by working with those people I already knew to identify some students from the relevant period who were not on Facebook. I then used an interview guide to engage all the participants in conversations about their experiences at Shimer College and how different aspects of those experiences might have affected their life trajectories over the past 40 or more years.

One question I tried to answer as part of this research is how my participants felt their work performance might have differed from their work colleagues who might have had a more career-focused education. I tried to draw them out to reflect on their interactions with coworkers who had career-specific college educations and whether they thought their own career paths benefitted from or were hindered by having a liberal arts degree. This area of questioning was not very fruitful. We also discussed their job history or career paths they followed. Did they think their job choices were influenced by their Shimer experiences and what aspects of their experiences at Shimer helped prepare them for any positions they held? This area of exploration was one of the more interesting because of the diverse paths followed by many.

Given the growing careerist approach to higher education, I was interested in what my participants thought about the question of college as career or life preparation, a question that has led to changes in college curricula over the years. During the 17th century, schools in the United States offered a classical education (Gaff, 1983) to produce a “cultured gentleman” (Rudolph, 1977). Even in the 19th century, colleges were expected to train intellect and build character, with the expectation that classical languages would help brains develop to solve other problems (Bok, 2006). However, by the time of the Civil War, colleges began to focus on career training, which was perceived as a more democratic goal. A broader liberal arts program was seen as appropriate for those with no need to work or who expected to become teachers in secondary schools (Jencks & Riesman, 2002).

I was also curious about the effects of living on campus and interacting closely with faculty and other students. Among aspects of a residential college education are living and eating on campus, direct and personal interactions with faculty members and other members of the college community, and the development of close relationships with other students, especially outside the classroom. I was able to learn how much those in-person interactions contributed to the academic and personal development of the participants and if and how those interactions were valued.

Another question I hoped to answer was how college prepares students for the many facets of their lives after leaving school. One of my areas of interest was to learn if and how their Shimer experiences may have affected the personal lives of the participants such as in their choices of employers or friends, among other decisions. I was able to

derive answers to all the preceding areas of interest by asking questions that were sufficiently broad to encourage the participants to present their own thoughts without prompting.

Shimer College

Shimer College was a small liberal arts college in Illinois that closed as an independent entity in 2017 as a result of declining enrollment, after which its program was absorbed by North Central College, also in Illinois. Before its demise as a standalone college, Shimer went through major changes during its life, starting as a girls' academy in Mount Carroll, Illinois, in 1853. In 1896, it developed an ongoing relationship with the University of Chicago and in 1950, strengthened that relationship by adopting Robert Hutchins' "Chicago" or Great Books program and converting to a 4-year coeducational institution (Moorhead, 1983). Hutchins' "Chicago Program" taught three curriculum categories (natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences), each spanning several courses in a defined sequence intended to integrate the development of knowledge in those fields over a period of time, ending in a capstone series of courses in philosophy and history (Jencks & Riesman, 2002). Shimer also began recruiting students to enter after completing 10th or 11th grades as "early entrants," a program that was subsequently funded for a few years as part of a Ford Foundation study (Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1953, 1957). Shimer continued this practice after the Ford Foundation funding ended (Moorhead, 1983).

As a result of declining enrollment and internal strife, Shimer declared bankruptcy, auctioned off its campus, and moved to Waukegan, Illinois, in 1979, and

subsequently moved to the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago in 2006 (Moorhead, 1983; North Central College, 2016). The move to Waukegan forced the college to store many of its archives at the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Regional History Center, and I was able to access those records to obtain much of the historical data cited in this work. In 2016, Shimer's continued existence was no longer feasible, and the college was acquired by North Central College, where it is now known as the Shimer Great Books School (North Central College, 2016).

The overall environment at Shimer College in its various iterations had many facets, any or all of which may have affected its students. The school never had more than about 500 students, small even in the 1960s. Each class met twice a week for discussions and in a combined lecture section once a week. Instead of textbooks, students read original source material with social science and humanities courses that typically required reading as many as 10 books per class each semester (Appendix B). For example, the Spring 1969 syllabus for Social Science I, typically taken in a student's first year, listed 15 texts including works by Benedict, Durkheim, Erikson, Freud, and Weber (Shimer College, 1969b). The Humanities III syllabus listed 14 books, including works by Plato, Mann, Milton, Shaw, and Wilde (Shimer College, 1969a). The discussion sections, typically with about 15 students sitting around a table, were true seminars with the instructors in the role of facilitator guiding and keeping the students on topic. Given the size of the surrounding town and distance to other towns, many faculty members lived reasonably close to campus. I had dinner at least once during my time as a student with one of my instructors and his family at his home just across the street from the

campus. At least four faculty members lived in apartments in the dormitories and interacted with the resident students, and all unmarried students not living with their parents were required to live on campus (Shimer College, 1965). Research has shown that contact between students and faculty outside the classroom, such as having meals together, is beneficial to student success (Astin, 1992; Clark et al., 1972; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

As a former Shimer student from the 1960s and the bearer of a liberal arts degree (earned elsewhere), I have personally benefitted from an educational focus on the liberal arts, despite my employment for many years in technology-related fields. When I reconnected on Facebook with my Shimer College friends, I discovered that many of them had also found careers in areas of technology, despite their similar liberal arts background. I originally questioned how so many had found careers in technology, given that Shimer's science facilities were so sparse that students interested in attending medical school had to meet their laboratory science requirements during summer sessions elsewhere. As I became more interested in the value of a liberal arts foundation for an undergraduate degree, I expanded my question to explore how Shimer students nearing the end of their work careers perceived the value of their liberal arts and Great Books education at Shimer College after 40 plus years.

Academic Program

During the 1960s, the college was classified as being selective based on the SAT and ACT scores of its entering students (Astin, 1971; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973), the same rating listed then for Northwestern University. As another

comparison, the University of Chicago was rated one level above both Shimer College and, therefore, Northwestern University (Astin, 1971; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973). Its student population was listed as being about 500 in the mid-1960s and, after a major internal political dispute, dropped to below 300 by 1970, spanning the period when the participants in my study were enrolled (Astin, 1971; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973; Moorhead, 1983).

As noted earlier, the academic program was built around three major subject topics or general course areas that were linked to integrative courses. The major subject areas were Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences, each a four-course sequence, while the integrative courses included History, a foreign language, Philosophy, Logic, and Analysis, spanning the general courses and an additional sequence of capstone courses on History and Philosophy (Chickering, 1966; Shimer College, 1965). Each of the general subject and integrative subject areas culminated in an all-day comprehensive examination that included content or skills covered in the underlying courses. The comprehensive examinations for the general areas covered all four courses in the sequence and those for the integrative areas included material from multiple domains. Each comprehensive examination included multiple-choice and short- and long-answer essay questions. I was able to substantiate my discussions of Shimer's program through use of the NIU archives, mentioned earlier, which holds copies of Shimer syllabi and exams from before the college was evicted from its original campus, the period currently under study.

The standard course load for each student during the 1960s and 1970s was 3 general courses per semester for a total of 24 courses over the normal 4-year college program, in addition to any language or physical education requirements. Of those 24 courses, 15 were required, which meant that all students had those same 15 courses in common. From a pedagogical perspective, it meant that every faculty member at that time could depend on a common knowledge base. For example, someone teaching Humanities IV could assume that all students in that class had read James Joyce's *Ulysses* in Humanities III. From the perspective of an individual student, this also means that Shimer graduates, even today and spanning multiple generations, have that common reading list as a basis for discussions.

The curriculum can best be described through examples of two courses and one comprehensive examination. Natural Science I was the Shimer version of a chemistry course. In that course, instead of learning chemical formulae, students studied the development of the scientific method through the history of the discovery of oxygen, with readings including original works by Lavoisier and Priestley. Social Science I covered various ways to study humankind and included books by Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, Jean Piaget, and others. As a side note, even the core reading list in use at Shimer's current incarnation as a school at North Central College, while it has been updated to reflect more diversity, is very similar to the reading lists used in the 1960s (*Shimer Great Books School Curriculum*, n.d.).

The breadth of the comprehensive examinations can be shown in the examination for the Analysis course sequence, which included material from Humanities I (art and

music), Humanities II (literature analysis), and Social Science I (discussed above). For the comprehensive examination, students were required to listen to a symphony, read William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and study Botticelli's painting, *The Birth of Venus*, in addition to reviewing the underlying course content. One question on the test required that students write a speech for the dedication of a print of the Botticelli painting as it might have been written by William Golding and on the topic, "Is World Peace Possible?" This question required students to integrate their understanding of art interpretation, an analysis of Golding's book, and concepts of human interrelations in a format designed to be delivered as a speech and not an essay. The espoused purpose of Shimer's curriculum was to prepare students to respond to different situations and to exercise judgment (Shimer College, 1965), or, as it was described to prospective students, to prepare its graduates to think in multiple disciplines.

As mentioned earlier, students took three classes each semester in addition to courses to complete the foreign language and physical education requirements. As some students "placed out" of one or more courses, not all students at a given level had the same schedule. Each class contained about 15 students and met twice weekly for about two hours in a seminar arrangement with all participants including the teacher/facilitator sitting around a table. No classes met on Wednesdays, giving students time to do their reading for the second weekly class meeting. There was also a weekly hour-long lecture session that combined all of the sections. All courses used original source materials (no textbooks), with some courses covering about a dozen books. Most of the courses required a paper every two or three weeks, and all courses had final examinations.

Similar to the comprehensive examinations, final examinations also had both multiple choice and essay questions.

Entering students arrived a week before the semester started, an orientation period that provided low-stress opportunities for students to learn their way around the campus and surrounding community. This period was also used for placement tests as students were permitted to place out of some courses to meet the requirements for mathematics and foreign languages. That first week on campus also allowed the entering students a chance to bond with one another without the stresses of the academic year and before the returning students arrived. They also met the few returning students who were on campus to assist with orientation.

Institutional Characteristics

Shimer's campus was about a mile from the center of Mount Carroll with a major east-west road (Chicago to Savanna, Illinois) as its southern boundary. The campus itself was two blocks wide and about a half mile long. The southern half of the campus was a clear grassy area with some trees and was popular for spontaneous and planned social activities like sledding and picnics. The north half of the campus included all but two of the college's 11 buildings, including dormitory, classroom, and office buildings surrounding the quad, an open area with a few trees. A dormitory and a theater built in the mid-1960s were located across the street from the east side of the campus. Most of the buildings were built in the earlier part of the 20th century, the exceptions being two dormitories constructed in 1959 and 1962 (Shimer College, 1965). Other buildings

housed the library, administration offices, two more dormitories, an infirmary, an auditorium, classrooms, science labs, and a gymnasium and pool.

All students, except for those who were married or living with their parents, were required to live on campus and eat in the dining hall (Shimer College, 1965). Students living in the dormitories were not permitted to have cars on campus until they had completed three semesters in college, had a grade point average of at least 2.2, and were not on financial aid (Shimer College, 1966). At the beginning of the enrollment period covered by my study (1963–1973), dormitories had a restriction on opposite sex visiting. My recollection (and that of friends on Facebook) is that female students were required to be in their dormitories by a specific time each evening, ranging from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m., later on nights with no classes the next day and for students not in their first year (Shimer College, 1966). Male students, as was typical for that era, did not have that restriction. These restrictions were relaxed gradually during this period.

Options for activities were limited, with most activities organized by students. Among these were a student-run radio station, intramural sports, a choral group, and a theater group. Given the small size of the academic community, faculty participated in many activities, including taking roles in the student dramatics productions and playing in athletic events. One of the dormitories had McNeal Grill, a snack bar and lounge, in its basement and was open afternoons and evenings. The lounge was a very popular gathering spot, with groups of students playing cards, chatting, taking breaks from studying, and occasionally continuing a debate from a class that day.

Location Characteristics

Mount Carroll, Illinois, had a population of about 2,100 and was roughly 130 miles due west of Chicago, or about 7 miles east of the Mississippi River. I recall being told that the bowling alley had previously been a movie theater but had been unable to survive in the television age. Other than the A&P grocery store, all of the stores were locally owned and carried a limited selection. There were 3 cities of about 30,000 people about 30 miles distant if more shopping and health care options were desired. Mount Carroll had only 2 doctors, and the nearest hospital was in a town 7 miles away and had minimal facilities.

After growing up in Philadelphia, which at the time was the third largest city in the country, I found small-town living an interesting experience. Credit cards were not as ubiquitous as they are today, especially for students, so every store in town had a pad of “counter checks” from the local bank and had no qualms about accepting checks from anyone. I learned on my first visit to one of the grocery stores that they would deliver my purchase—a month’s supply of soda and snacks—to my dormitory, saving me the challenge of carrying everything on the mile-long trek back to campus. I stayed in a rented apartment in Mount Carroll one summer and was surprised to learn from the full-time residents that the crime risk was so low that most people left their doors unlocked and their keys in their cars.

Entertainment in town was almost nonexistent. There were three bars and one of them, Poffenberger’s (also known as Poffy’s) in Appendix C, would serve alcoholic beverages to students without demanding proof of being of legal drinking age. Most

weekend nights saw that bar filled with students and some unmarried faculty members. During my second year, a group of students leased space in the basement of a downtown store, set up a coffeehouse, and offered entertainment by the many talented folk singers at Shimer. Those who wanted to see a movie or get a decent pizza had to cadge a ride to Savanna, Illinois, a Mississippi River town about seven miles west of Mount Carroll.

Student Characteristics

About a third of the students were from larger cities, the largest single source being Chicago and its suburbs, and I recall a sizeable number were from the East Coast (Heist et al., 1967). Also, my memory is that the student population was mostly White, but I have been unable to locate any confirming documentation. About half of the students' parents had at least a bachelor's degree while about a fifth had no college background (Heist et al., 1967). About half of the fathers had upper-level occupations and 15% were in blue-collar occupations (Heist et al., 1967). It is likely that for about half of the students, coming from small or large cities, Shimer College was smaller than their high school and Mount Carroll was smaller than their hometown. Most of the participants in my interviews confirmed this impression about their high school size.

As stated earlier, Shimer was listed as being a selective college in 1967–1968, with students having a mean SAT score of 1200 (Astin, 1971). While most students were of traditional age (or younger if they were early entrants), there were a few students who were older, either because they were military veterans or had decided to further their education after having been in the workforce for several years. In a study for the Ford Foundation on the early entrance concept, students at Shimer scored substantially higher

on area tests of the Graduate Record Examinations than the national norm (Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1957); data on the overall student body are not available as discussed under limitations.

It is the combination of these attributes that I think made the Shimer environment during the period under study an ideal focus for research of this type because it reduced the potential for variations among student experiences. About two-thirds of the 24 courses necessary for graduation were taken by all students. Even the few students not required to live in the dormitories still spent a lot of time on campus between classes or participating in campus activities. Using Astin's I-E-O (input, environment, outcome) model (1993) as a method for understanding the effects of a college environment, the inflexible academic program at Shimer coupled with its insular and somewhat isolated environment should eliminate most variation from the environmental factors discussed in Astin's model. The inputs, or student characteristics, were more likely to contribute to any variation, and I learned about some of those differences in the interviews to understand how they may have affected the participants' college experiences.

My interviews showed that the attributes mentioned above—the academic program, institutional characteristics, isolation and resultant insular social opportunities, and student backgrounds—coupled with the contemporaneous political and economic climate, affected the students during a critical period in their lives. This dissertation is an attempt to shed light on those attributes that had the most effect on students' lives. While the limited scope of my research and the size of the institution under study restrict the generalizability of its results, I was able to learn and make meaning of former Shimer

students' perceptions of their experience after 40 or more years of post-college life and reflection.

Significance

This research offers new and significant results because of the underlying question and the time duration involved. My questions were open-ended, encouraging the participants to identify the topics for discussion. Unlike most studies on the effects of college attendance that extend 5 to 10 years, this research was retrospective and went back approximately 50 years.

Most studies on the effects of college attendance focus on specific environmental aspects, such as college size or living on campus instead of commuting. The extant studies attempt to isolate the effects of the chosen aspect, looking for specific effects on student outcomes like changes in religious observance. Instead, my study asked the participants to identify what aspects of their experiences affected them while attending college. As these aspects were identified, I was able to explore more about these experiences and attempt to understand how the participants were affected at the time and through their subsequent lives.

Many studies on the effects of college attendance look at how students changed while in college or shortly after graduation. Some longer-term longitudinal studies analyze how young-adult graduates change through a period after graduation, typically looking for specific cognitive or behavioral changes over a defined period. These studies are powerful, but often do not keep participants engaged for decades. My study, looking

back about 50 years, supports a more mature perspective on what aspects of college attendance had significant long-term effects on the participants.

Summary

As my contribution to the ongoing discussion of the value of a college education, especially as related to that found in a small liberal arts school, I interviewed a group of students who attended a small and geographically isolated Great Books college in the 1960s and early 1970s. My goal was not so much to prove the benefit of one type of college or curriculum, but to learn how some aspects of that educational experience may have influenced participants life trajectories. Although I had some preconceptions about the topic, this work and the preliminary research in my pilot study have contradicted some of my ideas, confirmed others, and added some new thoughts to the mix.

II. Literature Review

My research is on the perceived short- and long-term effects of having attended Shimer College, a very small and geographically isolated liberal arts college, in the 1960s and 1970s. I interviewed people who attended Shimer between 1960 and 1976 to learn whether aspects of their experiences at Shimer had an effect on them at the time and how those experiences affected them over the subsequent decades. During the period that my participants attended Shimer College, its student population ranged from a low of about 200 students both at the beginning and end of the study period to about 500 in 1966 (Shimer College, n.d.-c).

I chose to study Shimer College because I was familiar with the school as I was a student there from 1966 through 1969 and because I thought it possessed several attributes that, in combination, made it an interesting environment in which to be a resident student. It was one of very few colleges following a Great Books program exclusively (Casement, n.d.). Shimer College was located in a very small town more than two hours from the nearest major metropolitan area, required all of its students to live and eat on campus (Shimer College, 1966), and had a very small student body (Shimer College, n.d.-c). The period under study also had some interesting characteristics, with the nation's population divided by feelings about the war in Vietnam, assassinations of major figures, and uprisings in large cities while the participants were attending college.

Additionally, the subsequent years during which the participants in this study lived and may have found partners, had children, and/or were employed, were part of a period of major technological changes, economic growth, and global political changes.

Higher Education Context

History

Higher education institutions in the United States were founded for multiple purposes. One rationale for starting colleges in the United States in its early days was to ensure that the nation's laws were written by educated people prepared for public service (Rudolph, 1990; Thelin, 2004). Other reasons for forming colleges were the desire to create a more cohesive society by establishing a sense of unity among the immigrant population, to advance the state of knowledge and learning in the United States, or to train teachers (Rudolph, 1990). Despite the espoused desire to unify the population through a higher level of education, some people expected colleges to help maintain the social-cultural status quo, especially in the Southern states, where colleges were more elitist and served to maintain Southern culture (Thelin, 2004).

The focus of higher education in the United States has swung between specialization and a broader general education. Colleges during the Depression Era 1930s moved away from specialization toward a broader education and then returned in the post-World War II era to more specialized disciplines (Rudolph, 1977). Part of this change was a recognition by leaders of the older and less-specialized colleges that their graduates were not competent in understanding and communicating about more complex specialized topics (Rudolph, 1977). However, the 1960s saw a renewed interest in

colleges that offered a broader education, leading to the founding of several experimental colleges and more interest in the already existing Great Books colleges (Cubbage, 2009). Bailey recognized the tensions between general knowledge and the need for specialization when he said that universities were producing technicians who could not see the big picture. He suggested that new disciplines might be developed that focused on interdependencies (1977).

Much has been written on the question of how college affects students, including a book covering 20 years of research (and an updated edition covering another decade) entitled *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Although it is hard to disagree with the idea that attending college would affect an individual's life (Astin, 1977, p. 5), it is important to consider that someone's life might still be different if he or she did not attend college at all or had some other type of postsecondary education (Astin, 1977, 1993). Another question is whether it is accurate to ascribe the effects to the college itself or to the characteristics of the college attended or even to the (possibly unique) experiences for that specific student (Astin, 1993).

One of the challenges in researching this topic is the seeming shift in research orientation in the 21st century. As stated, my focus is on the college experience of students in the 1960s and early 1970s at a very small rural college with very few non-White students. Most recent research on college students is focused on social identity, racial or social privilege, oppression, and multiple identities (L. D. Patton et al., 2016). Patton et al. state that older development theories would not be applicable to current students "due to ongoing changes in society" (p. 312) and are unclear about whether the

converse holds: that recent theories are not useful when studying an earlier generation of college students. Patton et al. mention technological advances as something relevant to recent students but not relevant for earlier student populations. Additionally, very little recent work has been on psychosocial or cognitive development, which is more related to my study (L. D. Patton et al., 2016).

Astin's I-E-O Model

Astin proposed what he called the “I-E-O model” to describe the effects of college—a paradigm that, while a reasonable representation, makes the college experience sound like a manufacturing process (Astin, 1993, p. 7). Under this model, the “I” represents the “inputs,” or the characteristics of the student when entering college. While in college, students are exposed to the college “environment”: the classrooms, policies, physical infrastructure, faculty, and other students—the “E.” Upon graduating or otherwise leaving the college environment, the “outcomes” (“O”) are defined as the changes in the students after being exposed to the college environment (Astin, 1993, p. 7). Other authors exploring the effects of college attendance have discussed the three components of that model, not always using the same terminology (Chickering, 1966; Clark et al., 1972).

Inputs

Evaluating the outcomes of a college education without considering the characteristics of the students and the rationale for their college choice would be akin to discussing a menu item without addressing the quality of the raw ingredients. Similarly, evaluating the effects of a college program without considering ways in which students

entering one college differ from those entering a different college could lead the program evaluator to ascribe differing outcomes to the programs themselves (Astin, 1992).

Graduates of different colleges are actually more likely to differ because of their characteristics when entering, and conversely, any differences among colleges will influence the characteristics of the students choosing to attend those colleges (Bowen, 1977). For example, colleges with a focus on intellectual atmosphere and growth are more likely to attract students with a more intellectual focus (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970). This synergistic relationship is a combination of the college's approach to recruitment and selection with a self-selection process by the students (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970).

Students select a college for many reasons. Some may pick a college because of that college's reputation for career preparation in the field in which the student is interested. Students may also pick a college because of its cost and then enter a career field driven by that college's programs (Manski, 1983). Continuing the idea of cost as a driver, students coming from families with greater financial resources will consider the programs offered, while students from less well-off families will consider financial aid as a prime driver. Interestingly, there is also a geographical component to the use of cost as a basis for selecting a specific institution in that students from the East Coast tend to look at the academic opportunities while those from the Midwest are more likely to be cost-driven (Paulsen, 1990). Other factors are the college's location, size, general reputation, and distance from home, with the programs, quality, cost, and location being the primary decision criteria (Paulsen, 1990).

Environment

A university is not just a place in which students learn but is also a “state of mind” (Carnochan, 1993, p. 21). Chickering and Reisser identified seven aspects of a college environment that they say will affect students’ experience while in college: clear and consistent institutional objectives, the number of students, student–faculty relationships, the curriculum, teaching style choices, friendships and student community formation, and student development programs and services (1993).

While these elements are critical, I would add geographic factors as well. For example, I think that students attending a college close to home or in a busy urban area may spend less time on campus engaging with the campus environment. It is also important to recognize that a college environment is largely a factor of the types of students enrolled there (Astin, 1965). Astin adds faculty characteristics, financial aid availability, the majors offered, and residential status to the above environmental factors (1993).

The physical attributes of a college campus also have an effect on its students, with students perceiving the physical campus as part of the student’s identity (Kuh et al., 2005). Some students reported they felt a real connection to the campus almost immediately on their arrival for their campus tour (Kuh et al., 2005). This feeling about how special their college is becomes so strong that students feel there is no other college like it (Kuh et al., 2005). This attachment to the college is important because college attendance occurs at a time in students’ lives when they are experiencing a major period of psychological development linked to their growth into adults (Lairio et al., 2013), and

students are more likely to feel comfortable in that stage if in an environment they feel supports that growth. In some ways, college is not the real world, but is instead a place that allows its students to live in a space safe from day-to-day family expectations and distant, for a few years, from outside demands (Deresiewicz, 2014).

Curriculum. A liberal arts education goes beyond the idea of vocational or practical education and instead prepares students for all of life (Gaff, 1983). Graduates in some career-oriented majors do not always develop a broad enough understanding to integrate what they have learned in that field with other knowledge, and those graduates also usually cannot connect one field to relevant information in other fields (C. M. Barker, 2000). In contrast, a liberal arts program provides familiarity with various subjects, allowing for synthesis across subjects and the development of the skills needed for lifelong learning (Gaff, 1983; Mattfield, 1974), with an overarching goal of helping its students learn to make sound judgments (Mattfield, 1974). A recent study of college students, the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (Wabash Study), showed that students attending liberal arts colleges developed greater critical thinking skills than did students at research-oriented or state universities (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013).

To some people in the United States, especially those from families with a higher socioeconomic status, selective private liberal arts colleges represent their ideal of higher education. In support of this assertion, a large proportion of students in liberal arts colleges come from families in the upper socioeconomic levels (Astin, 1999). While some colleges that claim a strong liberal arts focus are actually strong professional

colleges, older and more selective primarily residential colleges with better funding are more likely to be authentic liberal arts colleges (Delucchi, 1997).

Great Books Programs. A Great Books program could be considered a variant of a traditional liberal arts program that relies on reading original texts in multiple fields (Bok, 2006). Shimer College has been described as a Great Books college for several decades (Cubbage, 2009), and after several years of declining enrollment, Shimer closed as an independent college and is now the “Great Books School of North Central College” (North Central College, 2016). Shimer adopted the Great Books program in 1950 through its affiliation with the University of Chicago, one of the prominent adopters of the approach (Cubbage, 2009).

The thought behind a Great Books program is that through immersion in what some consider the seminal works in various fields the students will develop an understanding “of the fundamental questions of human existence, social organization, and the natural and physical environment” (Bok, 2006, p. 263). A Great Books curriculum requires that all students take a sequence of the same courses and therefore, all will have read and discussed the same books. The recent Wabash Study showed that students “expos[ed] to clear and organized instruction” showed increased critical thinking skills and more interest in continuous learning (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013, p. 9). A Great Books program also eschews the lecture format of many college programs in favor of engaging the students through discussion and arguments about the texts and the authors’ intent. It is not atypical for those discussions to carry over into mealtime debates that might draw in other students because of the commonality of the reading requirements (Bok, 2006).

The Great Books program can be implemented with a fixed and unchanging library or with one that adopts new works to keep pace with changes in thinking and to incorporate more works by female and minority writers, not found in the standard canon. Updating the reading selections is a change from Hutchins' model of a fixed library, but doing so might be more relevant in a democratic society (Carnochan, 1993). How science is taught is also a concern among critics of the Great Books programs, with some questioning whether it is better to teach science or to teach *about* science (Gaff, 1983). Interestingly, Yale in 1830 rejected the idea of using original works in favor of using science textbooks because the college's faculty thought that younger students could not effectively analyze the material (Yale College, 1830).

Academics as an Environmental Factor. How courses are developed and taught can influence the college environment. Among other principles, university pedagogies might "require students to engage with each other," encourage students to look for new experiences, engender a "will to learn," and require students to take and defend their own positions on course discussions (Barnett, 2009, p. 438). In such an environment, students will have trust in each other and in the transformative learning process, which will support students in sharing and understanding information while living with the discomfort of changing perceptions about their knowledge (E. W. Taylor, 2007). Student–student conversations are important to learning on campus as are student–faculty connections, both in and out of the classroom. The student–faculty interactions lead to greater student support of faculty goals. The meaningfulness of teacher–student

interactions is determined by the educational program's structure (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970).

One of the goals of postsecondary programs has been to prepare graduates for a life and career after college. A comparison of examination questions used in less and more selective liberal arts colleges found that examination questions at the more selective colleges lean toward demanding higher-order skills than do those used at less selective liberal arts colleges. This contrast in questions supports the belief in a link between college selectivity and educational quality (Braxton & Nordvall, 1985). The use of such complex questions suggests a greater engagement in the learning process at those more selective institutions than at others (Braxton & Nordvall, 1985). This higher-order thinking, requiring the students to link what they learned in one class into a larger framework, fosters student curiosity and interest in continuous learning (Bowen, 1977, p. 89).

Archived examinations used at Shimer College in the 1960s contain examples of what might be classified as questions requiring higher-order thinking. For example, an examination from a literature-related class asks the students to discuss how a Flaubert book might be rewritten as a drama. Another question, from a biology class, asks the students to discuss how Darwinians might have been affected had Mendel's work been discovered 35 years earlier. These questions require a deeper engagement with the material than might have resulted from questions asking only for a summary of the Flaubert or Mendel works. The administration at Shimer College espoused the belief that

Shimer's learning process, which supported such complex questions, would likely have carried over to nonclass discussions (Shimer College, n.d.-b).

Residential Living. One aspect of college attendance reported to have a great effect on students' lives is whether students choose to live on campus (Astin, 1984, 1992; Chickering, 1974a; Kegan, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella et al., 2005; Strange & Banning, 2001). Interestingly, several of the authors discussing this topic use a negative approach, describing what is lost to commuting students, rather than ascribing those benefits to the residential students. Astin reported that living at home resulted in the greatest number of major negative effects on educational outcomes (1992). Astin also elaborated on the effects of living at home, which include less well-developed leadership skills, less frequent attendance at campus performances, and minimal cultural awareness. Students living at home are less likely to be satisfied with their education and with their undergraduate experience (Astin, 1977). In an interesting juxtaposition of potential benefits however, Astin also claimed that campus living led to greater hedonism and leadership (1977).

Chickering agreed with the magnitude and scope of the negative effects of living at home, regardless of the institution type or size of demographic category. He found that students who commute from their parental home do not achieve the levels of learning and personal development desired or expected by their institutions (Chickering, 1974a). The reverse is true for those who live in college dormitories, who exceed learning and personal development expectations, regardless of those students' differences in ability,

previous education, or family demographics (Chickering, 1974a). This difference spans all four years of college attendance.

The students who live at home are handicapped from the beginning of their education. Starting out with this handicap affects their attempts to complete their degree because of their diminished involvement in academic, extracurricular, and social activities. This diminished student involvement leads to a reduced commitment to their academic program and to an increased attrition rate. This difference increases through the matriculation period, because residential students have greater access to, and are more likely to seek out and benefit from, campus resources and experiences (Chickering, 1974a).

Living on campus typically enhances the effects of the college experience, as residential students are more likely to be open to personal developmental growth resulting from their college experience than are commuting students (Astin, 1992; Chickering, 1974a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The experience also leads to a more liberal approach toward politics and religion. Residential students are more likely to develop greater autonomy, tolerance, empathy, and a more intellectual orientation, leading to greater persistence in college (Astin, 1992; Chickering, 1974a, 1974b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The major benefit of living on campus is that it leads to more interaction with faculty and other students, an aspect enhanced at smaller colleges (Astin, 1977). Research has shown that residential living also increases the effect of liberal arts colleges through increased formal and informal interaction with other community members facilitated by

their full-time environment (Astin, 1984; Pascarella et al., 2005; Tinto, 1993). Greater involvement with campus social and intellectual activities leads to more contact with faculty and with other students who can help with academic challenges and increase learning opportunities (Tinto, 1993). The actual act of leaving home and going away to college also helps students become more independent and leads to greater self-authorship, an implicit goal of most college programs (Kegan, 1982).

Students attending small, rural, residential colleges may complain about the lack of activities, both on campus because of the size of the college and in its surrounding area. However, that lack of external activities can motivate full-time students to be more engaged with the campus community and develop more meaningful lives (Strange & Banning, 2001). Mark Benney, who taught at Shimer College in the early 1960s, said that the “students, in their rural isolation, were hard put to it to entertain themselves, and they invented extracurricular activities at an alarming rate” (Degras, 1966, p. 320).

College Size. Institutional size has a negative relationship with how satisfied students are with their instructors and whether they perceive their instructors as being student-oriented (Astin, 1993, p. 326), with smaller colleges encouraging more student–faculty interaction. Conversely, the potential for more informal faculty contact is likely to lead to greater impact on students in small, residential colleges (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Feldman & Newcomb, 1970). There is a strong link between college size and how successfully institutional objectives are implemented. Smaller colleges have clearer and more effectively implemented institutional objectives (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The more recent Wabash Study showed increases in a desire to inquire and learn among

students who were challenged by their instructors and received faster responses on grading (Loes et al., 2012). The Wabash Study also showed that high quality interactions with faculty was a predictor of student growth in areas such as moral reasoning and critical thinking skills (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, 2007)

The link between size and effectiveness is based on the concept that if students have more common experiences with each other, especially in classroom settings, those discussions are likely to carry over to group conversations out of class. Feldman and Newcomb said that those “spill over” conversations are more likely to occur in smaller environments with less separation between learning and living spaces (1970, pp. 268–269). These student–student and student–faculty conversations outside the classroom can reinforce the development of cognitive skills taught in class and increase student development in areas of critical thinking and analytical skills (Astin, 1992, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In terms of the effectiveness of student–student and student–faculty interactions, Horowitz claimed that peer approval is more important than faculty approval (1987).

Students also are more likely to develop leadership skills at small colleges. The increase in leadership skills occurs because students in small colleges participate in more and a wider variety of extracurricular activities than those in larger colleges and are also more likely to assume responsible positions in campus organizations than those in larger colleges (R. G. Barker, 1964; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). For those students embarking on their higher-education life with plans to enroll in graduate programs, research by the Higher Education Institute showed that their attendance at a smaller college gave them an

advantage over their peers who attended public research institutions whose graduates had lower rates of enrollment in postgraduate study (Astin, 1992).

Outcomes

Showing that the environmental factors described above have an effect on students, colleges that successfully integrate experiences among courses along with social experiences have greater gains in learning and intellectual development (Pike et al., 2003). However, one of the challenges of identifying the actual effects of the college experience is determining which effects are the result of college attendance as opposed to those from normal maturation (Jones & Watt, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). That is, was college attendance the causative factor for any changes (Astin, 1993)? Another question is whether those effects differ from those that might have occurred if those students had chosen a different type of college or had not attended college at all (Astin, 1993, p. 5). Among the domains researchers have identified in which students can be affected are their attitudes, beliefs, self-concept, competence, achievement, and career earnings (Astin, 1977, 1993; Cohn, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Attitudes. College attendance affects students' attitudes toward various aspects of life, including greater willingness to live among multicultural populations, acceptance of life in a global society, and increases in areas of interest (Bok, 2006). The changes in these attitudes are directly related to their academic engagement while in college (Arum et al., 2012), highlighting the importance of the environmental factors discussed above. Attending college results in an increased sense of competence, self-worth, and liberalism (Astin, 1977). Although these changes occur while a students attend college, some might

be due to the student's maturation process or concurrent societal changes. It was thus important to try to identify college-specific effects during my participant interviews. Long-term effects also could result from a reinforcing effect as graduates follow career and social trajectories aligned with other college graduates. In support of the reinforcing effects of degree completion, Astin's research showed that nongraduates may experience diminished effects from their time in college (1977). Attending college also engenders an openness to new information and its influence among students and recent graduates, one of the goals of a college education (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970).

Beliefs. A report on general education programs said that colleges hope to build in students an ability to think for themselves and to allow interest in the common good to overtake a younger person's desire to fulfill personal needs (Harvard University, 1945). This increase in independent thinking aligns with an increase in liberalism (coupled with a decrease in conservative beliefs) and a decline in religious beliefs (Astin, 1977). These changes have multiple links. For example, the greatest increase in liberalism is linked to male students who come from Jewish or Roman Catholic families. Large increases in liberalism are also associated with majoring in the social sciences, but peer influence, especially from living in a dormitory in close contact with other students, may be more critical for those increases in liberalism than contact with faculty in or out of class (Astin, 1977). In nonreligious domains, college attendance also leads to an increased belief in one's leadership skills and popularity with the opposite sex (Astin, 1977). College graduates are also more likely to vote and to participate in civic affairs (Bok, 2006).

Self-Concept. Students' self-concept can change in various ways as a result of their college attendance. One is the question of "character," in which students are expected to become "good" people, an idea that Hutchins rejects in favor of promoting "hard intellectual work...[as] the best foundation of character" because otherwise one's "moral sense rests on habit and precept alone" (1936, p. 93). Another possibility lies in the different effects of either a professional or a liberal arts education, which Mattfield rejects in favor of student changes because of their maturation and changing goals (1974).

One of the goals of college is helping students move from a high school level of learning in which they perceive themselves as receivers of information to a higher level in which they create new knowledge and understanding. Baxter-Magolda conducted longitudinal research on those effects, which she categorizes as a growth towards self-authorship (2008). In one study, she followed 70 students until they were 38 years old, at which time her study sample was down to 36 students. She found that the majority entered college with a need to rely on others for their own beliefs and identity. That dependency decreased while in college, but it was not until they had graduated and were living on their own that "most were able to bring their voices to the foreground to construct their own beliefs, identities, and interdependent relations with others" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 48). This finding that the expected effects of college attendance may not be fully realized until years after graduation is of special relevance in my research exploring graduate perceptions decades after matriculation.

Competence. Students ascribe competence to their social experiences and claim that interacting with and learning about others helps them to learn more about

themselves. They also say that differences with others help increase engagement and reflection, leading to more learning (Arum & Roksa, 2014). One of the purposes of college is to develop critical thinking skills, that is, to learn to define problems, develop arguments, identify relevant facts or evidence, come up with solutions, and display judgment in then identifying a solution (Bok, 2006). Intellectual growth in this direction is furthered as faculty and peers challenge students' beliefs, leading them to synthesize and contextualize new information, creating new knowledge (Brown, 2004; Felder & Brent, 2004).

College should provide more than specific career-oriented training by helping students prepare for life in a world of rapid social and technological change (Astin et al., 1984; Trow, 1973). Being able to adapt to those changes requires critical thinking skills, ability to synthesize new information, and an affinity for lifelong learning (Astin et al., 1984). It is likely that a formal education provides the best preparation for predicted changes and that, conversely, those without proper education will be more likely to suffer through their inability to adapt (Trow, 1973). General cultural knowledge is a critical part of being able to adapt to change, and students in smaller institutions show a greater increase in that knowledge than those in larger colleges (Astin, 1977). It is also interesting that humanities graduates with advanced degrees credit their undergraduate education for helping them in their career achievements more than their graduate programs did (Bradburn et al., 2006).

Achievement. There are multiple ways to evaluate the effects of college on student achievement, including success at finding and retaining a job, earnings, and

attendance and completion of graduate school. Students in career-oriented majors benefitted from that career training by having fewer and shorter periods of unemployment than those in non-career-oriented majors and were usually employed in fields related to their major. However, regardless of college type or size, those who graduated in non-career-oriented majors found employment that spanned many more occupations (Choy & Bradburn, 2008), although they were less likely to be employed four years after graduation (Cataldi et al., 2014). As mentioned above, one of the goals of a college education is to increase students' skills in synthesis, critical thinking, and reasoning, and the past several decades have seen a major increase in the incomes of graduates with those skills (Liu & Grusky, 2013). Employers agree on the need for field-specific skills coupled with the broader skills described above (Hart Research Associates, 2013).

The decision to attend graduate school was positively influenced by attending an undergraduate college with a student-oriented faculty, having academically merit-based financial aid, and by the college having a higher percentage of Jewish students. Negative influences were larger institutional size, a higher percentage of engineering majors, and attendance at a public university (Astin, 1993).

Careers and Earnings. Multiple studies have shown the value of a college education and the associated degree to earning potential. Attaining a 4-year degree results in more than a 50% increase in income over that of someone with just a high school diploma. The 4-year degree also results in an unemployment rate two-thirds lower than that of a high school graduate, who is also three times more likely to be living in poverty (Cohn, 2011; Day & Newburger, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2014).

It is possible that, as mentioned earlier, increased performance by college graduates may also be related to the “inputs,” characteristics that led to those individuals attending college (Bowen, 1977). Graduates of professional programs in fields such as law, medicine, technical fields, or scientific research did, however, credit their education with their success while nonprofessional graduates were less likely to feel that their undergraduate education was important (Bradburn et al., 2006). While a degree is credited by many students for their initial employment, it can also lead to the graduates being less satisfied with that employment because of heightened expectations (Ross & Reskin, 1992).

Employers are looking for a combination of both soft (or liberal arts-related) skills coupled with field-specific competencies, and those generic skills provide greater returns than the focused fields of study (Arum & Roksa, 2014). Graduates themselves differ on the importance of generic as opposed to specific skills in the workplace with students who majored in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) fields favoring the field-specific courses while those in humanities and social or behavioral sciences report that their liberal arts courses were more important (Bradburn et al., 2006). This divergent opinion also differentiated graduates based on the type of college attended, with graduates of public institutions ascribing their success to their majors, professional training classes, and internships, while graduates of private nonprofit colleges said their liberal arts courses were more important (Bradburn et al., 2006). Not stated was whether the graduates’ occupations were linked to the type of college they attended.

Short- and Long-Term Effects. One of the most critical skills needed in the workplace by college graduates is the interest in and capability for lifelong learning. The ability to adapt to our changing world is more important for long-term career success than the critical thinking and reasoning skills mentioned already (Astin et al., 1984). College graduates are more inclined than those with just a high school education “to engage in activities that are likely to add to their knowledge (for example, serious reading, continuing education) after graduation” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 142; *Time Spent in Leisure Activities in 2014, by Gender, Age, and Educational Attainment*, 2015). Whether this intellectual interest continues for a longer period may depend on the graduates’ interactions with other graduates after college, magnified by the tendency for college graduates to work with other graduates (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970; Gaff, 1983; Jencks & Riesman, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Students in STEM areas reported greater increases in those continuous learning skills than students who majored in arts, humanities, and education. This difference seems related to the level of contextual learning in those fields (Hayek & Kuh, 1999, p. 10). Despite the contributions of extracurricular activities and student–faculty interactions to other areas of student development, including intrapersonal and interpersonal competence, those activities were not seen as contributing to students’ continuous learning competencies (Hayek & Kuh, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, students tend to become more liberal while in college and that tendency extends into postgraduate life, albeit at a somewhat diminished level. This continued move toward greater liberalism extends into graduates’ later years of life with

little reversion to precollege levels (Astin, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The long-term effects of this increased liberalism are seen in graduates' political activities such as voting and participation in political discussions and political processes continuing into old age (Astin, 1977, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Factors Unique for Shimer College

Despite, or possibly because of, its size, Shimer College has been the subject of a number of articles, books, and dissertations. *Time* magazine devoted a full page to an article about the college that commented on the lack of academic departments and noted that teachers rotated among different subject areas. The article lauded the academic success of the program, citing the high scores of its graduates on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), who were ranked at or tied for first place in 3 subject areas in the reports of 222 colleges from the Educational Testing Service. The dean of admissions at the University of Chicago said their graduate programs were always happy to get a Shimer graduate ("Unknown, Unsung and Unusual," 1963).

Shimer College was a very small liberal arts college that followed the general education principles of Robert Hutchins' Great Books program. In a greeting to new students in the *Student Handbook*, its president said that Shimer "seeks to offer a broad general education for every student to develop in himself the capacity for independent thought on which sound judgment may be founded" (Shimer College, 1966, p. 2). The pedagogical method, intended to foster independent thinking among the students, was based on small discussion-oriented classes with about 15 students that lasted about 2 hours and met twice weekly with the instructor acting as a discussion facilitator (Shimer

College, 1966). This program aligned with the precepts laid out by Yale College in the early 19th century: that the object of college was to lay the foundation of a superior education and that lectures do not engage the mind (Yale College, 1830).

Jencks and Riesman

Christopher Jencks and David Riesman have written several major works on education and sociology. They collaborated on a 1966 article in *The Phi Delta Kappan* on Shimer College. That article was intended as part of a larger chapter on Shimer College to be included in their then-forthcoming book, *Academic Revolution*. However, that chapter was not included in the published book, leaving the journal article as the only source of Shimer information from that notable pair of authors.

Jencks and Riesman described the Shimer program as being “based on the conviction that it is better to know a little about a whole range of topics than a lot about a small area” (1966, p. 418). They emphasized, however, that the Shimer approach was not superficial because the program went into depth in several areas (Jencks & Riesman, 1966). The article raised a question about Shimer’s ability to continue to attract faculty who would maintain the Shimer culture, suggesting that new faculty would be drawn more by the symbolism of the curriculum than by the curriculum itself. They also commented, as is noted in the Shimer catalog, that “instructors are not just catalysts but active participants” (Jencks & Riesman, 1966, p. 418; Shimer College, 1965). Few students entered Shimer with the academic preparation needed for its intellectual atmosphere, and the close and trusting links between faculty and students helped students develop their intellectual capabilities (Jencks & Riesman, 1966).

Some new students “could not come to terms with either their teachers or their milieu” (Jencks & Riesman, 1966, p. 419) and wound up becoming part of Shimer’s high attrition rate. But those who did stay seemed to change both intellectually and in appearance, becoming more bohemian (at least while still enrolled) and interested in continuous learning after leaving college. Jencks and Riesman described the faculty as being “intelligent but not scintillating” and suggested that the college’s ability to engage the students as active participants instead of passive listeners was due more to faculty dedication (1966, p. 419). The environment produced impressive results with Shimer’s graduates better prepared for graduate work than students from other colleges with more specialized programs (Jencks & Riesman, 1966).

Arthur Chickering: Institutional Differences

Arthur Chickering is an award-winning researcher who has worked in multiple areas of higher education, including student development, college programs and environments, and student affairs. He worked on a project to research the interactions between student characteristics and institutional differences at liberal arts colleges in the 1960s, the period of matriculation covered in my research. He studied 13 colleges, all of which had fewer than 1,500 students, including Shimer College, over a 4-year period. While the colleges have some similarities, he identified five domains in which he could differentiate the colleges: curriculum organization, religiosity, campus rules, student–faculty interactions, and the institutional objectives (1966).

Chickering described Shimer as having “developed a highly structured and tightly integrated curriculum which places explicit emphasis on developing intellectual skills in

analysis, rhetoric, logic, and integration, and on developing a comprehensive background of basic information” (1966, pp. 2–3). He also described Shimer as having a very strong sense of community with indefinable but understood “Shimerian” attitudes and behaviors (p. 8). Along with students at Earlham and Goddard Colleges, Shimer students are classified as “Intellectual Altruists.” These students have diverse interests, show appreciation for works in various fields, are logical and critical in approaching problems, and have an active imagination. In line with today’s employment demands, the students at those institutions have a tolerance for ambiguity, are experimentally oriented, and prefer complexity to simplicity (Chickering, 1966). Chickering spent enough time at Shimer to have a faculty member attempt to explain the curriculum and the linkages between courses and the multiple exams by drawing what looks like a football play chart that was included in the final report (Chickering, 1966). Chickering’s diagram was similar to that published in the Shimer catalog (Appendix D).

Preliminary Report on Entering Students

In 1965, the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education began working with the Union for Research and Experimentation in Higher Education to study multiple aspects of the college experience. The first phase of their project included surveys of entering students to assess important student characteristics. The fall 1966 entering class at Shimer College was one of the initial subjects of these surveys, and the survey results contain some valuable information about that year’s entering class, conveniently within the period under study (Heist et al., 1967).

About half of the parents of the fall 1966 entering class had at least a bachelor's degree, with about a third also having some graduate education. Only about a fifth of the parents ended their formal education with high school, some not having a high school diploma. About two-thirds of the fathers worked in the top two (of seven) occupational brackets and only 15% were in blue-collar occupations. Income for about 40% of the students' families was \$10,000 to \$20,000, or about \$80,000 to \$160,000 in 2020 dollars after calculating for inflation. The incomes of the remaining 60% of the families were split evenly between those with incomes below \$10,000 and above \$20,000 (Heist et al., 1967).

Shimer students were less concerned about vocational matters than were their fathers, with those students being more interested in intellectual, artistic, and humanitarian concerns. Despite the politically charged times during the Vietnam war, Shimer students were more focused on the intellectual-artistic-humanitarian areas than political events, which received only secondary consideration (Heist et al., 1967). The volume of pleasure reading reported by Shimer entrants demonstrated their intellectual focus. Almost every entering student reported reading at least 3 books in the previous year, with more than half having read 15 or more books, and over a third of the students having read more than 25 books (Heist et al., 1967).

The entering class was the product of a diverse group of high schools, with about a third coming from large city or suburban school districts, two-fifths from towns and small cities, and the remainder from private schools, evenly split between sectarian and nonsectarian. Almost two-thirds of this group of entering students said that they chose

Shimer College because they wanted to take advantage of Shimer's more individualized program and to be part of a small closely-knit community, in contrast to the larger high schools they attended. About half of the entering class reported that Shimer was either their only or their first choice of colleges. The other half had reservations about the cost, geographic isolation, or the small size. Other reasons for choosing or being hesitant about their choice of Shimer, such as the opportunity to live away from home, were about evenly split (Heist et al., 1967).

The entering students had an idealized expectation for their college experience as being at "a small, private four-year liberal arts college, with a communal, scholarly, yet experimental atmosphere wherein they could pursue a broad general program of learning through independent study and group discussion classes" (p. 13). However, the group of entering students might also be considered intellectual elitists, with the majority of the entering class preferring to be in a student body where most students were highly intelligent instead of a mix of student intelligence. They also preferred to be with students who were selected because of who they were rather than because of their grades (Heist et al., 1967).

Almost all of the entering class thought that Shimer exhibited a special quality differentiating it from other colleges they considered, echoing Kuh et al. (Heist et al., 1967; Kuh et al., 2005). They credited four factors for differentiating Shimer from other colleges: academic and intellectual aspects, social character and sense of community, student-faculty interactions, and the college's experimental features. A few also liked that Shimer fostered individual growth and development (Heist et al., 1967).

Students thought the most important educational objective at Shimer was that it helped students develop critical and constructive thinking skills. They also liked the objective of developing an understanding in multiple disciplines. These students entered with the aim of being in an intellectual atmosphere while working toward their vocational goals (Heist et al., 1967).

The researchers observed that Shimer's unique curriculum and atmosphere seemed to have attracted many atypical students. The number of atypical students led the researchers to suggest that, based on their scores on the evaluation material, the student body was "either the product of special admissions practices, along with a related recruitment policy, or the product of an interesting process of self-selection" (Heist et al., 1967, p. 50). They also described the students as being "a large group of independent, non-authoritarian, and sophisticated young people at age 17" (p. 52). The researchers said the "students arrived at Shimer with a well-defined, intellectual-esthetic orientation" (p. 54).

These researchers also identified the students' tolerance for ambiguity and interest in complexity over simple situations, much as described earlier by Chickering (Chickering, 1966; Heist et al., 1967). It is possible that the combination of traits of the entering class was linked to another finding: that almost half of the students admitted to being emotionally disturbed. The high percentage of students with emotional problems could be the result of nonconformists coping with identity issues in their previous schools (Heist et al., 1967).

The research concluded on a positive note acknowledging the students' commitment to academic work and their autonomy at a young age. The students were perceived as being "an exciting group of students to teach, with their highly intellectual orientation" (Heist et al., 1967, p. 57). The researchers were concerned about whether the faculty and program were going to be able to meet the challenges posed by this group of students (Heist et al., 1967).

Early Entrants

One way that Shimer differentiated itself was through its early entrant program, which encouraged students to attend Shimer before graduating from high school, typically entering after 11th grade but sometimes after 10th grade. The Ford Foundation, through its Fund for the Advancement of Education, was researching ways to smooth the transition from high school to college, as well as helping returning soldiers manage their transition to civilian life. The Foundation studied several options, including the early entrant program and a program that eventually led to the Advanced Placement tests (Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1957).

The Foundation worked with several small colleges to research the effects of the early entrant program and it funded scholarships for students entering college as early entrants or "Scholars." Shimer College had already been accepting early entrants and was selected as one of the participants in the research. Unlike other participating colleges, which accepted only early entrants with higher-than-normal aptitude scores, Shimer chose to accept students with a wide range of aptitudes (Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1957).

Results showed that the early entrants typically had grades equivalent to, if not better than, their traditionally aged peers. A member of the College Entrance Examination Board said in the report that the early entrants demonstrated better mastery of a liberal arts program than many college seniors or graduate students. The students in the program found college much more challenging than their high school education, reported that being in college was much more productive than their friends' senior years in high school, and felt "rescued" from what would have been a wasted year (Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1957).

Mark Benney: Almost a Gentleman

Mark Benney, the pseudonym for Henry Degras, was a British career criminal until he was asked to write about his experiences in jail. Social researchers in Britain and the United States recognized the quality of his work and he eventually moved to the University of Chicago, where he worked with Howard Becker and David Riesman, among other sociological researchers. After leaving Chicago, he spent a year or two in the early 1960s teaching at Shimer, which had maintained a loose affiliation with the University of Chicago (Lee, 2015).

In his autobiographical work, *Almost a Gentleman*, Benney devoted a chapter to his experiences teaching at Shimer College and living in small-town Illinois. He described the Shimer faculty as being either former Chicago faculty, who took on the management of the curriculum, or "intelligent young refugees from large state universities, victims of the 'publish or perish' policies of such places" (Degras, 1966, p. 332). He was quite cynical about the administration's management, claiming that the

reported student–faculty ratio was low only because it counted “the President, who once in a while gave a course in Chemistry, and his secretary, who once in a while gave a course in Typing” (p. 332).

Benney did seem to enjoy working with the students, stating that their “interests, their unorthodoxy, created a steady hum of intellectuality in the dining room and dorms” (Degras, 1966, p. 333). He also noted that the “students, in their rural isolation, were hard put to it to entertain themselves, and they invented extracurricular activities at an alarming rate” and that the students were always forming clubs, each of which required a faculty adviser (p. 320). In line with the findings of the formal researchers previously cited, he identified the most interesting students as being “from academic families who wanted to get their offspring away from the dangers and distractions of a big city” (p. 333).

Conclusions

Higher education research documents a wide range of benefits to attending college. Dominated by studies designed to learn if the stated goals of college are achieved, very little work has been done from a student perspective, asking for their opinions about how they perceived their educational programs and college environments. In addition, most of the extant work has focused on relatively short time frames, with some extending out no more than a dozen years.

My research expands the literature by allowing my participants to identify the areas they perceived as important from a lengthy time horizon. The focus on Shimer College allows for an analysis of whether the curriculum and the skills the college aimed to develop in its students align with how former students perceive their college experience.

III. Methods

My primary question explores the perceived effect of attending Shimer College in the 1960s and early 1970s when it was a residential college in a small northwestern Illinois town: How do former Shimer College students from the 1960s and 1970s understand their experiences at Shimer? Specifically:

- What aspects of their Shimer experience do participants remember as being most salient to them when they were students?
- In what ways, if any, have participants' Shimer experiences influenced their lives since college?

Chickering and Reiser (1993) described seven aspects of a college environment that have an impact on the students: institutional objectives, institutional size, student–faculty relationships, the curriculum, teaching, friendships and student communities, and student development programs. I suspected there may be other aspects that also affect students. For example, Shimer College was located in a small town whose only nighttime activities were a bar and a student-run coffee shop. Did the lack of outside entertainment foster more interactions among the students?

It is also possible that environmental factors were less important than the type of student choosing to attend Shimer College (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970). The authors of one study on Shimer College commented on the personality profiles of the entering class,

stating that the composition of the student body could have been “the product of an interesting process of self-selection” (Heist et al., 1967, p. 50).

Conceptual Framework Considerations

Before starting my research, I needed a framework to guide my analysis. I had to think about what type of information I was gathering and my research goals. Among the questions I had to answer was whether I was looking at provable real-world information or that which existed primarily in the minds of the people being studied. I also had to consider whether the goal of my research was to effect immediate change in the environment I was investigating or if this work was to be more information gathering and sharing. I discuss these choices next.

Postpositivist

The postpositivist approach would probably have been applicable had I not expanded my original question beyond linking the Shimer College curriculum to preparation for technical careers. If I had pursued that narrower question about the effects of the curriculum, then a postpositivist approach would certainly have been applicable as I would have interviewed the former Shimer students for their impression of the effect of the curriculum on their ability to move into a new field.

Another aspect of the postpositivist approach is its insistence that reality is external (Glesne, 2011; Willis, 2007) and that everything is reality based (M. Q. Patton, 2002). An online discussion with some potential participants provided an example of the challenges of clarifying a shared memory. That discussion demonstrated the potential futility of the postpositivist approach when interviewing people about experiences 45

years in the past. One of my friends had posted a link to an article about a bar frequented by Shimer students in the 1960s describing that bar's relocation in the summer of 1966. One member of our group observed that he had entered Shimer in the fall of 1966 and that the bar moved during that academic year, which meant that the article was incorrect. Another person stated definitively that the bar was in the same location for his entire time as a student, and that he started at Shimer in 1964, disagreeing with both the article and the other person. Although we did reach an agreement on the bar's location, and this question about the timing of the bar's move might be validated through town property records archives, I would have been concerned that identifying an external reality-based truth about historical student experiences might be difficult given the passage of so much time.

Critical Theory

A critical theory approach also had some potential for my research. Given the lack of racial diversity in the Shimer student body, faculty, and curriculum, a critical theory-based study of the outcomes from a Shimer education would have focused on that aspect of the environment and might claim that the students' perceptions were molded and controlled by the curriculum and by the dominant White school faculty and administration (Willis, 2007). Instead of exploring the way the curriculum was designed to prepare the students for cultural and societal changes by teaching about the historical progression of ways in which people thought, I could have easily presented the case that the school and its rigid, standard curriculum were deliberately intended to maintain the status quo and to foster the growth of the dominant White culture (M. Q. Patton, 2002).

However, the critical theory approach is typically used to foster change, which was not one of my goals, and a retrospective review of a curriculum and institution as it existed 45-50 years ago was not conducive to fostering change so many years later. An interesting approach to the interviews might have been to determine if the participants believed their lives might have been different if the program had not been so Eurocentric, forcing on them a potentially distorted worldview (Glesne, 2011; Willis, 2007). Another perspective aligned with the critical theory approach would have been to determine if there was a feeling of oppression at the time they were students resulting from a rigid and enforced curriculum. Since I planned to learn from the participants how the program affected them, as perceived several decades later, a critical theory approach was not applicable.

Interpretivism or Social Construction and Constructivism

After evaluating the options, I decided that an interpretivist or constructivist approach was my best paradigm. A theoretical framework supports the idea that I would be studying the world of people as constructed and perceived by them, and that such a world must be studied differently than when examining nonsocial or self-aware entities (M. Q. Patton, 2002). In a constructivist world, Patton says truth relies on perception (2002), rather than on reality, which is socially constructed (Glesne, 2011; Willis, 2007).

Returning to my earlier example of the discussion about when a bar popular among the students moved to a new location, an interpretivist approach would permit the existence of a truth that may not be based in a physical reality. Guba and Lincoln note that truth is based on consensus and may not correspond with an objective reality (1989).

If our group had not agreed that the location was changed during the 1966-1967 academic year, and that instead the bar had been in the same place since 1964, that conclusion would have to be accepted as truth for that group.

Another aspect of the interpretivist approach that was relevant to my research was the idea that information is not generalizable but limited to the group studied (Willis, 2007). Just as the “truth” of our conclusion about the timing of the relocation of the bar was limited to the group in which it was discussed, my research on the effects of the experience at Shimer was limited to those who participated in the interviews. One question that intrigued me was whether an education of the type offered by Shimer would be advantageous to students hoping to succeed in a rapidly changing world. An interpretivist approach might have allowed me to conclude that for the specific group of people who attended Shimer at that particular time, some aspect of the Shimer College environment helped them in various ways.

The interpretivist approach also recognized that the interviews would bring out the truth as perceived by the participants, not necessarily a reality-based truth. Schwandt notes that while some constructivists may deny the existence of any reality, most do acknowledge that a reality does exist that is separate from personal observations (1997). One challenge in analyzing and interpreting these interviews was separating the perception-based truth from reality. Given the amount of time that had passed since the events we discussed, I suspect some participants had revised their perceptions of those historical experiences. They also may have described them from the perspective of their current epistemological framework instead of their perspective when the events occurred.

One objective of the interviews was to ask the participants to describe their recollections of their time at Shimer from their current and more mature perspective. Another acknowledgment of the power of the constructivist perspective is that it recognizes the multiple ways in which truth can be constructed: the bar location discussion having a basis within a specific objective time frame as well as in the mind of the engaged individual or a specific environment.

In the constructivist paradigm, reality is a social construct (Glesne, 2011; Willis, 2007). As I planned to interview the participants in my study, I envisioned multiple realities based on the probably divergent perceptions they would discuss. For example, students who spent the bulk of their evening social time watching television in the basement lounge of one dormitory may have been completely unaware of the network of bridge players in the lounge of another dormitory. Conversely, those who were part of the bridge-playing group may have spent their time at Shimer College unaware that a functional TV even existed in the basement of that other dormitory. Each group of former students would describe its experiences at Shimer within its own constructed reality.

Another relevant aspect of the constructivist approach is Willis' suggestion that the data be close to the subject (2007). Interviews with people who were directly involved in the Shimer College experience facilitated my gathering firsthand recollections and impressions. I tried to prompt memories by talking about my own personal experiences and by relaying anonymized information from conversations with other participants. The concept of using memory prompts aligns with another suggestion from Willis that each exposure carries the potential of new knowledge or interpretation

and it might have been interesting to conduct follow-up interviews to see if that produced any new information. However, I did not want to make more demands on my participants, given the amount of time they had already devoted to the project. I tried to guide each conversation to prompt additional memories and data to add to the research.

Research Methodology Choices

Case studies are somewhat similar to historical research because I was attempting to learn about experiences 50 years in the past. However, historical research is typically used when the only sources of information are documents and other records (Yin, 1989). The case study approach uses the same techniques as historical research but includes two more sources of evidence: direct observation (not available in this situation) and systematic interviews, which were a key part of my plans (Yin, 1989). A “case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (Yin, 1989, p. 20). It was my intent, through combining interviews with the limited available archival information, to corroborate some information gathered in the interviews. As an example, in one case, I was able to flesh out some details on an examination mentioned by a participant because I found a copy of the examination in the archives at Northern Illinois University. A case study involves particularization, looking at a specific phenomenon, individual or environment, as opposed to generalization, a goal of other models (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). As my research was focused on the environment that existed at a specific college during a limited period, generalization was not feasible. Stake says that case studies are used “to obtain the descriptions and interpretation of others” (1995, p. 64) and that was an apt

description of my goal: to learn how others describe and interpret their college experiences.

Yin says that “how and why questions are explanatory and likely to lead to a case study” (1989, p. 18), and my questions certainly met that requirement. I rejected a historical approach because of the availability of living people to discuss the experiences, a qualifier that differentiates between an historical approach and a case study, which uses interviews to gather data (Yin, 1989). A case study is also appropriate when the topic is not entirely historical but also includes contemporary topics of study (Yin, 2014), relevant in respect to my goal to identify the lifetime effects of the Shimer experience. A case study offered the greatest flexibility for a topic that spanned multiple years of experiences.

Participant Selection

I interviewed people who attended Shimer College during the period in question (1960s and early 1970s) and who are now (obviously) several decades removed from that experience. I selected those dates because of major changes that affected the school after those years. Through the interviews, I tried to learn how those former students now perceive their college experience as seen through the lens of approximately 50 years. I attempted to elicit the participants’ thoughts on how their lives were affected by the time they spent at Shimer College.

I selected 16 former Shimer students using a modified snowball participant selection method, first selecting some from people on Facebook with whom I was already in contact, and then from others referred by them. Yin advises against the use of the term

“sample” because such use implies that the group of participants is representative of a larger population leading to a generalizable conclusion (2014). However, a snowball or referral selection method was appropriate for my research because of the limited number of potential participants and the need for trust in the interviews (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

In an attempt to schedule enough interviews using that process, I publicized my research in one or more Facebook groups for Shimer alums, asking for volunteers or referrals to alumni not on Facebook. Shimer College closed as an independent entity in Spring 2017 and was acquired by North Central College. I had originally planned to work through the alumni office at North Central to see what help they could provide for contacting other alumni, reducing my dependence on Facebook. However, that proved unnecessary, as I was able to locate enough participants through referrals by participants in my original pool. Allowing my participant population to be limited to those on Facebook would have effectively limited my interviews to those who have become comfortable with technology-enabled communications, eliminating the population that is not interested in, adept at using, or comfortable with social media. One of the objectives of my research was to learn if and how the Shimer College environment might have helped its students cope with and adapt to changes. Limiting my interview participants to those who, through their Facebook use, have demonstrated that capability would have hindered my ability to identify other ways in which former Shimer College students might have adapted to change.

I eventually used a hybrid process for selecting my participants using a combination of open recruitment combined with referrals. My initial pool consisted of

people I knew, either from having been at Shimer as students contemporaneously or because we had communicated on Facebook. I then posted a note on Facebook in a group limited to people who had attended Shimer in Mount Carroll. I expanded the pool by asking for referrals from my participants and specifically asking for people who did not have a social media presence.

In compliance with federal regulations and university policy, I submitted my research proposal to the George Mason University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for their determination of what was needed to protect my research participants. The IRB decided that my research, since it involved adults and had minimal risk factors, was exempt (see Appendix E). In accordance with good research guidelines and policies, I explained the purpose of my research to each of the participants and obtained their consent to the terms of the interview, including that it would be recorded and transcribed. I anonymized the participants' names in the transcripts, and, other than the two married couples I interviewed, none of the participants knew the identities of the other participants.

Possible Participant Bias Factors

One of my concerns, that of participant diversity, was realized in my pilot study. I had identified several dichotomies among the prospective participants:

- First generation college students vs. those whose parents had attended college.
- Male vs. female.
- Early entrants vs. traditional high school graduates.
- From small town vs. metropolitan area.

- Those who graduated from Shimer College vs. those who did not graduate at all or who completed their degrees elsewhere.

My concern was that in failing to ensure that my candidates were “representative of the target population and inclusive of all known constituencies” (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 362), a nonrepresentative mix of those variables might skew the results because of possible existing biases on the part of the participants. For example, although I selected my pilot study participants from people I knew on Facebook who might be responsive, all three participants had similar characteristics in that all three reported that they came from small towns, were early entrants, had parents who attended college, and two of the three earned degrees elsewhere, with the third earning a Shimer degree years after leaving Shimer College. Consideration of participant attributes is a good way to control for bias (Maxwell, 2005) and to ensure that the respondents “reflect what are thought to be the general characteristics of the population in question” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 155). Participant heterogeneity is recommended in small samples to potentially produce more unique cases and so that shared patterns are more likely to be meaningful (Maxwell, 2005; M. Q. Patton, 2002).

In addition, one of my pilot study questions was about the effect of the small-town atmosphere on the students and whether that was seen positively or negatively. All three of the participants came from small towns and had a uniform negative response to the question about the effect of attending college in a small town, which might not have been the case for students who came from densely populated metropolitan areas. As a

result of that experience, I included the population category of the area in which the participant lived before attending Shimer in the list of dichotomies.

I discussed the question of participant diversity with the members of my dissertation committee, and we agreed that trying to force an even distribution of participants representative of the variations of those attributes was unnecessary. As I was interviewing people so many years later, it was likely that their discussions would be more affected by their subsequent lives than by their precollege lives. Also, attempting to force that diversity could delay the completion of the research project and would not necessarily produce different results. I think I was successful at obtaining a reasonable level of participant diversity in my final selection of participants. However, I have included those attributes in the participant data as described in Chapter 4 to demonstrate the success of my attempt at participant diversity.

Interview Process

Interview Options

After identifying people to interview, I exchanged emails with them to schedule telephone or online interviews, using whichever medium was more comfortable for them. I had hoped to schedule some in-person interviews, but the pool of participants I finally selected was too geographically spread to make that feasible. I had also hoped to conduct some interviews in groups of two or more participants, thinking that the participants' collective memories would help to prompt more memories and more engaged conversations than might occur in a conversation with me in a one-on-one interview.

Unfortunately, the only group interview I was able to schedule was with one of the two married couples in my participant pool.

My limited experience with the pilot study showed that the in-person interview was the best in that I did not have to rely on technology intermediation or sound quality problems and could more easily react to the participant's body language cues.

Unfortunately, I was unable to schedule interviews with any of the local Shimer alumni, forcing me to use only remote interviews. I tried to work with whatever technology my participants were most comfortable with and used standard telephone or web conferencing tools. I was able to identify ways to record the interviews using each of the media types and then had them transcribed professionally. The technology intermediation resulted in some issues with sound quality and I corrected the transcripts to get a high degree of accuracy.

Use of technology intermediation was not as satisfying as conducting them in person, as noted by Shuy (2003), who indicated a preference for in-person interviews because they typically have a more relaxed atmosphere with small talk, promote trust, and are less tiring, leading to longer discussion. However, despite my fears about technology-mediated interviews, we did engage in a reasonable amount of small talk about shared experiences connected to Shimer and life in general. I was also pleasantly surprised by the amount of personal information that was shared during the conversations, something I had not expected in the detached online modality.

Participant Autobiographical Memories

A few of the interviews resulted in some participant autobiographical vignettes as responses or anecdotes highlighting events that affected the participants' approaches to life. I developed short stories based on those vignettes that will help the reader feel a connection to the storyteller and that despite my attempts to paraphrase them, should have a feeling of accuracy (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Autobiographical works can be written as broad life histories or, as in this case, life stories. When using life stories, those tales will be less meaningful without the overall context showing more details about the place and time to demonstrate how the changing cultural and political environment may have affected how the participants acted when they were students (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). I have attempted to include more details through detailed narratives, while also maintaining participant anonymity, because the readers might otherwise forget the importance of the cultural milieu (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Some of the narratives from the various participants describe shared or similar contemporaneous events, providing multiple perspectives and a more holistic description than would be possible with a single participant. Those multiple perspectives of the same events will demonstrate not only the impact of the more static aspects of the environment but also of the effects of various people on each other (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Keightley suggested that memory is more than confirming facts about the past, that it helps people understand the past, and through that, achieve better understanding of the present (2010).

As my research was looking at the participants' experiences from almost 50 years ago, I suspected that some people may have had problems remembering enough about what they did or felt so many years ago. Luckily, there are two concepts I tested in my work on this project: the power of memories from adolescence and the effect of certain prompts.

Memories from peoples' adolescence are stronger than those from other life periods. When people are asked about an event or memory, they seem to identify more events from their adolescence and early adulthood than from other periods (Rubin et al., 1998). The adolescent period has such a strong influence that people will recall events, especially those that were happy, from their adolescence more frequently than other more important and life-changing events that happened at other life stages (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). Supplementing that concept, sad personal events from adolescence are typically not remembered, while positive events are extremely strong (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002). I tried to be more direct in some questions to encourage my participants to recall negative episodes if they failed to include any in our discussions.

The ease with which people remember their adolescence and early adulthood helped me with my research as that was the period in which I was interested. I was somewhat concerned about the preference shown for positive events. While I like to think that we were all happy as college students, the reality is certainly different. This preference for recalling positive events may be offset using memory prompts. Studies show that music and photographs from the relevant period can help bring back memories (Keightley, 2010). As another memory aid, I asked the participants to name some songs

from the time they were in college, hoping that would prompt their memories as listening to my favorites from that period prompted my own. I had hoped to also ask them about some photographs of classmates, faculty, and the Mount Carroll campus to help prompt some older memories of the period under discussion, but the lack of face-to-face interviews prevented me from doing so.

One potential concern in dealing with memories of events and experiences from a half-century in the past is the accuracy of those memories. Stake suggests that while “there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented ... there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view” (1995, p. 109). I used member-checking (Stake, 1995; Willis, 2007) as a way to verify some statements made by the participants. I asked some participants to discuss some statements made by other participants and to address their veracity. I was also able to confirm some memories about college rules or educational experiences by checking the college historical archives, which contain some catalogs, syllabi, examinations, and student handbooks. While historical accuracy is important, my research questions really focused on the participants’ perceptions of the effects of their experience. For example, a student might claim that a critical factor in his or her Shimer experience was the car he or she brought to campus his or her first year. If the archives state that first-year students were not permitted to have cars, that proven fact is less important than the participant’s recollection and perceived effect. I tried to be careful during the interviews to avoid turning them into a debate on memory accuracy and risk missing my objective: learning how they perceive the effects of those recalled experiences on their lives.

Interview Questions

Each interview was more of a conversation (Shuy, 2003), using the questions in Appendix F as an interview guide. I deliberately framed most questions as open-ended and conversation starters. My experiences in both the pilot study and this project were that, once the participants started thinking about the question and expanded their response, I eventually had to force a change to the next topic. I think the questions listed in the interview guide in Appendix F proved sufficient to provide answers to my core questions.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research must cope with a perception of unreliability; researchers must take care to ensure that observations, insights, and interpretations are reasonable and grounded in the data. To be considered trustworthy research, readers must have confidence in the conduct of the investigation and in its results (Merriam, 1998). The researcher should be able to satisfy concerns about whether results might have been different for a larger sample or if someone else might interpret the results differently (Merriam, 1998). The major criterion for any research is that readers can rely on the results sufficiently to invest their time and energy into using the results as a basis for their own work (Mishler, 1990). Questions about trustworthiness fall into four broad categories addressed below (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Confirmability

Confirmability considers researcher bias, addressed separately, and the ability of another researcher to replicate the research process. This last depends on whether the

research methods have been sufficiently transparent and detailed such that another researcher could conduct similar research and obtain similar results. My description of the research plans should provide sufficient detail about the plans and background information to allow someone else to replicate the process. To help confirm my interpretations of the data, I asked someone who did similar research to review the basic concepts underlying my findings and interpretations and she helped confirm my analysis as well as identifying an additional theme. Anonymized logs of the interviews were maintained to allow others to evaluate the process.

One of my major ongoing concerns has been my own role in this research. As I stated earlier, I attended Shimer College between 1966 and 1969, but did not graduate. I tried to be careful to use my memories only as prompts for discussion with my participants and not to insert my own thoughts into the conversations except to stimulate participants' responses. My interest in this research was prompted by a discovery that several people who attended Shimer entered technology-oriented fields, something that surprised me given Shimer's focus on liberal arts. My original question, on how people who attended Shimer chose technology careers, expanded into a broader question on the impact of the environment. Although I left Shimer because of my academic performance, I credit the Shimer program with helping to shape my own subsequent approach to work and education. Thus, I do not have any negative biases to overcome in my research. I think I was successful at maintaining neutrality in the interviews by asking open-ended questions and not challenging my participants. After completing my degree through courses in several other colleges and working at George Mason University, my interest

was in learning how the Shimer experience affected others who attended during the period in which I was a student.

I understand that some might question my own role in this research as someone who, as a former Shimer student from the period under study, could be one of the research participants. I tried to limit my part of the conversation in the interviews to using my recollections to help prompt memories in the participants and not to lead them to answers that I wanted to hear. As a member of the Shimer Alumni Board and a participant in the various Shimer groups on Facebook, I have interacted both virtually and in real life with many former students from as far back as the 1950s through students attending Shimer's current incarnation at North Central College. I have found those conversations fascinating because of the similarities and ease of conversation among people of different ages and backgrounds, with their only commonality being having attended Shimer College at different times over a period spanning 60 or more years. My research helped me learn about what affected my research participants.

Dependability

Qualitative researchers should strive not to rely on a narrow sampling of observations or interview participants, leading to a result selected by the researcher instead of one driven by the observations or interviews. Corollary issues are potentially ambiguous research questions, an unclear understanding of the researcher's role, and the lack of peer review (Miles & Huberman, 1994). My research questions were direct, but open enough to allow for emerging results, and I was careful throughout this research to avoid leading questions or imposing my thoughts in the interviews. I asked an

experienced researcher to review my anonymized summaries, analyses, and interpretations to confirm the processes I used.

Credibility and Authenticity

Research results must tell a believable story and make sense to the readers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This goal can be accomplished in several ways. One important criterion is the richness and thoroughness of the descriptions. My understanding of the participants' Shimer backgrounds helped me write detailed descriptions of the experiences shared by my participants. By virtue of my having shared many of the experiences with the participants, my narratives, where appropriate, should convey a greater sense of reality than ones written by someone without that shared experience. My interviews with multiple participants have some level of triangulation, especially with some participants' experiences being from different years. Some memories raised by participants have not aligned with those of others, and I have tried to include those as areas of uncertainty. Another concern was credibility, which can be assessed by the congruency of the multiple interview discussions combined with member checks. I asked my participants to review the transcripts of their interviews and the categories and themes that emerged (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In accordance with recommended case study analysis processes, I identified the categories and themes through an iterative process in which I first identified narrow concepts in my initial coding pass and then combined those to form the final results.

Transferability

Research usually has the goal of helping others come to a better understanding or awareness of something previously little known to the reader. Developing an understanding of a new concept can help the reader to evaluate or understand similar circumstances in a different setting. Some researchers might hope that their work could be generalizable to larger populations. My research focused on a very small, distinctive college environment during a very narrow slice of time. While the results of my study are not generalizable, the methods could be replicated for other college environments and/or for other periods of time. I think my descriptions of the participant selection and interview methods are sufficiently detailed to allow their use in other situations, producing another set of results.

Limitations

This research is subject to some limitations resulting from circumstances involving the history of Shimer College over the last 50 years, the use of personal interviews, and the effects of my own personal biases and experience. The college has experienced major financial problems over its entire history (Cubbage, 2009; Moorhead, 1983; Severson, 1975), resulting in two relocations and its eventual consolidation inside another college—the first move prompted by the pending loss of its campus because it could not meet its mortgage obligations. In May 2016, Shimer College announced its intent to close and merge its educational program into North Central College (North Central College, 2016). Documentation that would support some assertions about its program and outcomes is not available through the school offices and may, in fact, be

lost. As mentioned earlier, some documentation was archived at Northern Illinois University, and I was able to use those archives as part of my research. I have been able to corroborate some of my own memories through conversations with the few still-living faculty and staff from the period under study and incorporating confirming questions in my interviews with former students.

Interviews with those former students present another limitation. Patton says that interviewers can expect “distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness” and that interviews “are also subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewer, and self-serving responses” (2002, p. 306). There are also potential limitations from the selection of the participants (M. Q. Patton, 2002) in that I may have inadvertently selected a group of participants who have only positive or only negative thoughts about their experiences. Many of the participants expressed mixed thoughts about their time at Shimer, describing both positive and negative experiences. This variation among the responses provided a richer representation of the effects of their Shimer experiences.

Using interviews as the primary, if not sole, source of information could be perceived as a problem in qualitative research in terms of validity, missing information, and various causes of bias on the part of the participants. As mentioned above, some participants were unhappy about some aspects of their experience. For others, a combination of their age and the time that has elapsed since their experiences might have led to them forgetting or misremembering some experiences. As my interview questions asked the participants to reflect on what aspects of their long-ago college experiences

they consider important now, I think the research model may have compensated for those limitations. Their memories, even if inaccurate because of poor memory or bias, are my real interest. It is those potentially biased or inaccurate memories that have affected their lives and from which I want to learn. I think relying on interviews to gather data was essential for this research.

Perhaps the most challenging limitations for me were my own biases and experiences. As stated earlier, I attended Shimer College during the period on which my research was focused. While I used my memories to help prompt those of my participants, I was careful not to project those recollections on others, but to allow them to speak freely and not correct them. The second limitation is my own personal interest and belief in a liberal arts education and, more specifically, Shimer's pedagogical approach. As an adult I have come to recognize the value of the curriculum espoused by Shimer and other schools, teaching students how to think and work in multiple disciplines. I tried, as with my memories, to compartmentalize my own beliefs while working with my participants and analyzing their responses, a goal that I hope I achieved.

Analysis and Interpretation

After each interview was completed, I had the recording transcribed professionally and then confirmed the accuracy of the transcription by listening to the recordings while reading the transcription, using technology that allowed me to slow down the playback without affecting the original pitch. The transcriptions were reasonably accurate but each one required some minor corrections, mostly involving names. I had hoped to analyze and code as part of the collection process (Guba, 1978),

but instead I reviewed my notes after each interview to determine if there were any unexpected responses that might suggest that I revise my questions or phrasing before conducting subsequent interviews. This approach allowed me to ensure that I was getting responses that produced answers to my research questions by modifying my interview questions before I completed too many additional interviews. This iterative process occurred throughout the series of interviews, to “creat[e] a nuanced understanding” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 318) and to “clarify or extend data gathered from initial interviews” (Rowley, 2012, p. 264).

I interviewed 16 participants. Patton joked about the number of questions he received about recommended sample size (2002) and justified the ambiguity of his answer, “it depends” (2002, p. 244), with explanations of the various reasons for adjusting the sample size. Strauss and Corbin had the best suggestion: to keep sampling until one reaches saturation (1990). I interviewed people until I stopped hearing new responses to my questions. Reaching that saturation level was not my only constraint, as I also considered whether I was achieving the population diversity I described earlier.

After completing the interviews, I began a more structured analysis of the transcriptions, making a first pass through them looking for concepts that might answer my questions. Saldaña describes several coding methods with an introductory comment that the “coding methods are not discrete,” may overlap, and “can be mixed and matched as needed” (2013, p. 60). I used a combination of methods: “Descriptive” to summarize some discussions, “In Vivo” where the actual words and phrases used in the interviews are more appropriate than a summary, and “Versus” when I noticed potential internal

conflicts (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 88, 91, 115–119). Although this project was neither large nor complex, I found that a second coding pass was helpful, as it helped me consolidate themes.

I asked the participants if they would like to review the transcriptions so they could correct or clarify anything. Only a few responded to that request, primarily with corrections to place or people's names. Two participants also sent some notes with thoughts they had after their interview. I identified statements that conflicted with those of other participants and I attempted to address those inconsistencies. For example, if a participant later in the interview schedule reported a negative perception of something about which an earlier participant had a positive perception, I mentioned the differing opinion to elicit more information from the later participant on why there might be that difference.

As the purpose of this study was to learn about how the participants thought their college experiences affected them, I was less concerned about absolute accuracy than I might have been in an objective study. However, I did want to protect against gross exaggerations or complete falsification of events that would affect the credibility of the results. Protecting against this was where I used my own memories for some basic validity checking and then attempted to triangulate by confirming questionable events with other participants. As expected, in the course of the interviews, I heard some confirming stories, which also served to strengthen the perception of the importance of those experiences.

I decided to test a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) product, such as NVivo or Atlas.ti, as part of the research process to see if the software tool could help focus any themes. Yin said that computer tools could be useful but not consistently (2014), while Saldaña agreed that some auto-coding options could “alleviate some of the repetitiveness of manually coding similar passages of text” (2013, p. 31). I also agree with Seale’s suggestion that “creative thinking about data analysis” is more appropriate than hoping for a computer application to conduct that analysis (2003, p. 305).

Given the small number of interviews, I suspected that the use of a CAQDAS tool might be excessive. However, after meeting with a research librarian, I decided to use NVivo to analyze the transcripts. I found that the software provided a structure within which I could work more effectively. I used the software to identify phrases and concepts in the interview transcripts as my first coding pass. I then reviewed the multiple codes that emerged and identified multiple situations where there was significant overlap. The software helped me consolidate the overlapping coded sections from the various interviews more easily than I could have done manually. My use of the software also helped me recognize that my first coding pass might have been too granular, and it allowed me to use an iterative process to simplify the original coding themes for subsequent transcripts.

Summary

Using personal connections and referrals, I was able to assemble a reasonably diverse group of 16 people who had attended Shimer College in its final 15 years at its

original campus in Mount Carroll, Illinois. This group included a mix of genders, early entrants vs. traditionally aged students, and those who graduated from Shimer vs. those who left before graduation. There was representation both of students who were the first in their family to attend and/or graduate from college and of those with at least one parent who had attended college—as well as a mix of Shimer students who went on to earn graduate degrees and who did not.

I interviewed the participants remotely using multiple forms of technology and developed a rapport with all of them which led to some interesting and sometimes personally revealing conversations. The interviews produced results that I was able to link across multiple participant responses to develop concepts that contributed to answers to my research questions. Several participants commented that they enjoyed the conversations and thinking about their time at Shimer and subsequent lives.

As expected from my pilot study, which identified some common themes with only three participants, the full research study was successful at producing several common themes to answer my research questions: What aspects of their experiences at Shimer affected them during their time at Shimer and through their subsequent lives? These themes are explored in Chapter 4.

IV. Findings

In an attempt to learn what aspects of their experiences as students at Shimer College affected them first as students and later through their subsequent lives, I interviewed people who had attended the college in the 1960s and 1970s. During the period under study, Shimer College was a small (under 500 students) liberal arts college using a variant of Hutchins' Great Books program. The college was located in Mount Carroll, a small town with about 2,100 residents about 130 miles west of Chicago in northwestern Illinois. Shimer College, after relocating twice, closed as an independent college in 2017, and its program was absorbed by North Central College, in a Chicago suburb, as the Shimer Great Books School.

Participant Information

I interviewed 16 people who attended Shimer between 1960 and 1976. I chose this period because the beginning was the earliest for which I had been able to locate people to participate and the end marked the final years of Shimer's existence in Mount Carroll. This period included the years in which Shimer's enrollment peaked and then dropped precipitously as the college moved toward bankruptcy. The participants' names are all anonymized to protect their identities and I have masked their identifying characteristics by being vague about some details. In alphabetical order, the participants are:

Al

Al started at Shimer in 1968 and graduated in 1972. He grew up in a suburban area and was the first in his family to attend college. After leaving Shimer, he completed a graduate program that allowed him to be on the faculty of a university. Between leaving Shimer and his eventual teaching career, he was a photographer, held multiple positions in delivering various forms of therapy, and worked as a counselor.

Angela

Angela entered Shimer in 1966 as an early entrant after growing up in a suburban area. After graduating from Shimer, she attended graduate school and became a college professor. She also worked in an administrative role in her college before retiring.

Carol

Carol graduated from a metropolitan area suburban high school and started at Shimer in 1969. She left Shimer in 1972 before obtaining her bachelor's degree and completed her degree elsewhere, going on to earn a graduate degree. Carol had a lifelong career in health care.

Ian

Ian entered Shimer in 1962 as an early entrant after growing up in a small town. He stayed at Shimer for only two years and completed his education elsewhere several years later. He worked as a lab technician, as a computer programmer, and in various forms of scientific computing.

Irene

Irene entered Shimer in 1962 as an early entrant from a small town. She left Shimer in 1963 and went on to complete her undergraduate degree elsewhere, followed by attending graduate school and completing her degree. She has taught K–12 through college level, is a published author, and has worked in the theater.

Irv

Irv grew up in a small town and entered Shimer in 1965 as a high school graduate. He graduated from Shimer in 1969 and earned a graduate degree. After several years teaching, he switched careers to work in a high-level position in local government.

Jack

Jack graduated from a small-town high school and was the first in his family to attend college. He entered Shimer in 1966 and graduated in 1969, after which he attended graduate school, completing a degree. He worked in several different fields, starting as a teacher to avoid the draft. After teaching, he worked for several large corporations in multiple diverse positions as a project manager, in quality control, and as a plant manager.

Joan

Joan grew up in a large city and entered Shimer in 1969 as a high school graduate. After graduating from Shimer in 1973, she worked as a writer and editor.

Joseph

Joseph entered Shimer in 1971 after graduating from high school in the small town in which he grew up. He was the first in his family to attend college and left Shimer

in 1973, completing his undergraduate degree elsewhere and then completing a graduate degree. He worked for a large corporation in a technical field and then moved into Human Resources. He stayed in that field for the remainder of his career, becoming a serial entrepreneur who started at least three companies involved in human resource management.

Kathy

Kathy was an early entrant who grew up in a suburban area and entered Shimer in 1966. She graduated in 1969, taught elementary school, and then worked for a temp firm, becoming interested in business management. She went on to earn multiple graduate degrees and was a college professor before retiring.

Larry

Larry grew up in a small town, where he graduated from high school. He entered Shimer in 1967, graduated in 1970, and subsequently earned a graduate degree. He worked his way up through various positions, starting as truck driver, and then in various aspects of marketing, leading to multiple executive positions.

Olivia

Olivia grew up in a large city and entered Shimer as an early entrant in 1963. She graduated from Shimer in 1966, subsequently completing graduate school, which led to a career in health care research.

Pete

Pete was an early entrant from a small town who entered Shimer in 1964. He graduated from Shimer in 1968 and earned a graduate degree. He had a diverse career,

working as a lab technician, in sales, in management, as a writer, and in the food service field.

Quincy

Quincy entered Shimer in 1960 after graduating from high school in a small town. He graduated from Shimer in 1963 and went on to hold jobs in multiple countries and fields including teaching, religious work, computers, and consulting.

Riley

Riley grew up in a large city and entered Shimer in 1966 after graduating from high school. He graduated from Shimer in 1970 and subsequently attended graduate school. He worked in retail sales, as a teacher and school administrator, and as a writer; he also worked with housing people with disabilities.

Zoe

Zoe grew up in a large city suburb and entered Shimer in 1972 as a high school graduate. She graduated from Shimer in 1976 and then completed a graduate degree. She has worked as a librarian, programmer, and researcher.

Interview and Analysis Process

I interviewed the participants using technology intermediation such as telephone communications or web conferencing tools. The interviews lasted about 90 minutes each, were recorded, and were professionally transcribed. Upon receipt of the transcriptions, I listened to the recordings and checked each transcription for accuracy. After I was satisfied with the transcripts, I sent them to the respective participants for their feedback and corrections. After revising the transcripts based on participant feedback, I used

NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) research tool to facilitate the analysis of the transcripts and supplemental information. I then coded them in NVivo, producing 30 threads and used a descriptive framework strategy to analyze them, identifying five categories. Using an iterative process and working within NVivo, I consolidated and restructured what had been highly granularized threads to eight themes. After identifying the themes, I sent two transcripts and my analysis structure for feedback to a peer reviewer with qualitative research experience. She made a few constructive suggestions, that I implemented.

The five categories aggregated from topics I identified within NVivo were: reasons for attending Shimer, the physical environment, the curriculum, academics beyond the curriculum, and post-Shimer outcomes. Within these categories, eight themes emerged. I identified one theme within the participants' reasons for attending Shimer. The physical environment produced one theme, the curriculum resulted in two themes, academics beyond the classroom and outside the classroom experience each had one theme, and there were two themes in the post-Shimer outcomes category. I asked my participants for their feedback on the categories and themes and eight people responded, all confirming my analysis. One participant said that "this was as good as it gets when trying to characterize 'the Shimer experience'."

Some of the themes, those about reasons for attending Shimer and those about Shimer's physical environment, helped answer my research question about aspects of the participants' time at Shimer that affected them while they were students. The discussions of post-Shimer outcomes answered the question about long-term effects. Those themes

involving the curriculum and other academic areas affected the participants while attending Shimer as well as through their subsequent lives.

After reviewing the categories, I decided to use Astin's I-E-O model (inputs, environment, and outcomes) (1993) as the framework for presenting my findings. The categories and themes map onto this organizational structure. According to this model, the "inputs" section describes the characteristics of the students when they chose to attend Shimer College; "environment" covers the physical, academic, and personal aspects of the college experience; and the "outcomes" section addresses the students' subsequent lives after attending Shimer College. The rest of this chapter covers the categories and themes that emerged from my analysis, with supporting evidence from the interviews for those findings.

Inputs

Astin describes inputs as the "characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution" (1993b). The characteristics of the inputs in turn affect the environment as they represent the population of the college. For this analysis, I looked at the participants' family backgrounds, including where they grew up and whether they were the first in their family to attend or graduate from college. I also asked about the factors that led them to college and separated the analysis between those who entered Shimer before graduating from high school and those who were traditionally aged high school graduates.

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics can affect how students experience college. I used the questionnaire in Appendix G to gather information about the participants. I attempted to include participants who represented a range of relevant demographic groups. Of the 16 participants, seven were female and nine were male. This ratio was close to that among Shimer students during the period under study (Shimer College, n.d.-c). The participants attended Shimer between 1960 and 1976, with the majority having attended before 1970.

Of the 16 people interviewed, six entered as early entrants, leaving high school before graduation. Half of the participants came from a large city or a suburban locale, six from small towns, and two from places they described as “in-between.” Four of the 16 were the first in their families to attend or graduate from college. All of the participants attended another college after leaving Shimer; all but four earned graduate degrees, and four completed their undergraduate degrees elsewhere. See Appendix H for more details.

Reasons for Attending Shimer College

Shimer College attracted my study participants for two reasons: its Great Books curriculum and its early entrant program. I found it remarkable that there was consistency across my participants. My analysis showed that whether the participant was an early entrant shaped this response.

Push–Pull. The overarching theme among the participants when discussing their reasons for attending Shimer College was a rejection of their previous educational and social experiences in favor of what they perceived as a more welcoming environment at

Shimer. Some early entrants used Shimer primarily as an escape route and transferred elsewhere after one or two years, but the majority of both the traditional and early entrants found the Shimer program one they found attractive and felt that it met their needs. Thus, I named this theme “Push–Pull” in that the participants wanted to “push” away from their previous academic or social environments and were “pulled” by their perceptions of what Shimer offered, in contrast to their understandings of programs at other colleges.

Early Entrants. As noted earlier, Shimer accepted students before they graduated from high school, usually after tenth or eleventh grade. In Fall 1963, 24% of the 325 students were early entrants (Shimer College, n.d.-c). Two of the six early entrants that I interviewed did not graduate from Shimer but went on to complete their education elsewhere and four of the six earned graduate degrees.

Attending Shimer was described as the only choice for all six early entrants because they wanted to escape either their families or their high schools. Irene had moved with her family to a new town after completing two years of high school and did not feel that she fit. She had completed two years of high school at this time and was trying to negotiate with the new school system for a path to graduate early when she heard about Shimer’s early entrant program and contacted the school. This discovery led to her getting accepted and enrolled in a six-week period before school began that fall. Irene credits everything in her life to her attendance at Shimer because “if I had not gone to Shimer, I probably would have run away from home.” From her perspective, Shimer was a “way out” from her then-current hometown; she was also attracted to Shimer because

she “knew that it was a Great Books organized curriculum” with which she was familiar because her family had purchased the Great Books collection.

Olivia’s story was somewhat similar in that her family had just relocated over the summer because of her father’s employment. The class schedule at the high school in her new town would not allow her to take trigonometry and participate in the school band because they had only one section of trigonometry scheduled at the same time as band. After listening to her “melting down” like a “typical teenager,” her father mentioned that he had heard about a nearby college that accepted early entrants. She and her father visited Shimer and she applied, was accepted, and enrolled that fall, avoiding the conflict at her potential new high school.

Pete said that if he had stayed in high school another year, his grades would have dropped so much that he might never have been accepted to any college. He had friends who were attending Shimer, and when they came home over winter break, they regaled him with stories about the program. Armed with a laudatory article in *Time* magazine (Appendix A) that described Shimer’s intellectual climate (1963), he was able to convince his parents that this was the only way he could succeed. Despite his parents’ desire not to have their children overlap their years in college for financial reasons, they agreed to support his decision.

Angela was uncomfortable living at home and said that she “went to Shimer to escape my family.” She said, “It was the *Parade* magazine article [Appendix I] that first gave me the idea that, you mean I could go to college without having to suffer another whole year of high school?” Angela discussed the article with her father, who

subsequently mentioned Angela's interest in Shimer to a relative in academia. That relative said that Shimer had a good record, which Angela said convinced her parents to let her apply, not expecting her to be accepted.

The overall rationale for attending Shimer among the early entrants continues this motive, described by Ian, another early entrant: "I knew that if I was in school that year without anything to do, I was just going to get into lots of mischief." While Shimer's program appealed to the early entrants, they perceived attending Shimer more as a way to escape uncomfortable situations in high school or their family.

Traditional Age Entrants. In contrast to the early entrants, who saw Shimer primarily as an escape, the 10 participants who attended Shimer after graduating from high school were attracted to the Shimer environment, typically because of the academic program. Some were made aware of Shimer's existence and its programs through referrals from friends or secondary school faculty. Others learned about the college because Shimer, like many colleges then and now, recruited students through use of the mailing lists of students with scores over certain thresholds on the various scholarship and college admission tests. While some of the participants expressed a dislike for high school, most saw Shimer as a positive step forward, instead of as an escape path.

Al had a friend who knew someone who was attending Shimer. When Al asked his friend if that person liked Shimer, he was told that "it's a very strange school" and that "their friend went to sleep at night and had a stack of books by his or her bedside." When the friend woke up in the morning, he or she would "start reading like from the top

of the stack. They didn't get out of bed." Al thought that sounded great. He "liked the idea that people would read" because he "thought the answers were in books."

Carol did not like high school and was "interested in the history of ideas approach" at Shimer. She "liked the discussion class approach" and "knew that I was going for discussion classes with histories of ideas." She thought it was "cool" to attend a college that did not get into the "standard ... subject matter that you got in most colleges."

Instead of being initially attracted by the academics, Joseph was recruited by the dean of students (also the basketball coach), who had previously coached him in high school and convinced him to transfer from another college. He was not originally impressed by the curriculum so much as by the small campus and classrooms. Joseph did like that the program "compelled you to read" and "taught you how to present, how to write," skills he has valued since.

Quincy described himself as being "head-hunted" by Shimer and another college while in high school because he was a National Merit semifinalist. He reported that both schools wanted him because of his scores, but also because of the attached scholarship dollars. After visiting the campus and discussing financial aid packages, critical to his ability to attend Shimer, he toured the campus with the representatives, thinking, "I'd love to hang out with people like this" and decided to attend Shimer.

Riley said that he "ended up at Shimer" because he "didn't want to go to a college that was just like my high school, where they tell you basically what to think." He had a reputation in his conservative high school as "being a radical leftie wise guy," and a

counselor handed him a Shimer College brochure. After five minutes of reading, he said, “I knew where I wanted to go. That was it.” Riley said that he was attracted by the “whole idea of small seminar classes” and the assumption that Shimer would “help students develop a sense of their own idea of right and wrong, their own idea about doing things rather than imposing ideas on them and have them spit it back on a test.” Riley visited the Shimer campus that spring with his parents, who hated it, reinforcing his own desire to attend. He said that people have asked him how he knew that he wanted to attend Shimer, and he tells them that “I kind of knew I wanted to go to Shimer from the time I was six years old, in a way.”

Zoe described her teenage self as a “wannabe hippie” and thinks she was on the “young side” at the time. Her high school had started an alternative program during her last year and she was looking for a college that she considered alternative as well. She saw the Shimer catalog on the shelf. Zoe “thought [Shimer] was an alternative place,” but realizes “in perspective now, it is very traditional in some other ways.” Zoe was concerned that she might not meet Shimer’s admission requirements and applied only after visiting the campus and being assured of her probable acceptance. Zoe said that she was fascinated by the concept that Shimer represented.

The “traditional” age Shimer attendees were attracted primarily by the Shimer curriculum as presented in its catalogs and promotional material. Using this material, Shimer attracted students from over 30 states and a few foreign countries (Shimer, n.d.-c). Larry and Kathy both mentioned Shimer’s promotional material and specifically commented on the brochure in Appendix J as inspiring their interest in Shimer. Some

were also intrigued by articles in respected national publications, such as those in *Time* or *Parade* magazine, which may have helped convince their parents to support their decision. Having first- or second-degree connections to people who attended also helped them in their search for a college.

Environment

Astin describes the “E” (or Environment) in his I-E-O model as pertaining to the “various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed” (1993b, p. 7). I grouped the responses to the interview questions about the environment in three broad categories: physical, academic, and non-academic. There was some overlap among these categories, especially in regard to the size of the college, which spanned all three categories. Physical aspects covered primarily its location, campus layout, and size. The academic realm included the curriculum and Shimer’s teaching and class paradigms, which also linked back to the size of the college. Non-academic areas included student–faculty relationships (also linked to the academic topics), student–student relationships, and dormitory life.

Physical Environment

Ideal Vision. Participant opinions were mostly positive when discussing the college physical environment. Their recognition of the importance of both the physical size of the campus and of Mount Carroll and the small student population was echoed in other discussions of the environment. The participants loved the campus and its architecture, describing it as their ideal for a college campus (Appendix K). Larry thought

that the town and campus were “kind of the ideal vision.” Dimensions of the “ideal vision” theme included location, college layout, and college size.

Location. During the period under study, Shimer College was in Mount Carroll, Illinois, a small town with a population of 2,100 people in northwestern Illinois, about 130 miles west of Chicago and about 7 miles east of Savanna on the Mississippi River. There were 3 cities of about 30,000 population about 30 miles away and larger metropolitan areas about 60 miles away. Mount Carroll had three bars, one of which, Poffy’s, was popular among students as an evening and weekend gathering spot because it served under-age students. The Shimer College campus was a short walk from downtown Mount Carroll and was built around a rectangular quad.

Many students seemed to enjoy their time in Mount Carroll. They enjoyed the old trees and houses in town and talked about enjoying the walk between campus and downtown Mount Carroll or just walking around the town. Irv said that

the actual, physical environment in the small town nearby is important to me. I enjoyed going downtown. It’s a lovely town to walk in and I love the campus—it was just perfect. You couldn’t design a better place to go to.

Larry said: “it was a small town with a college attached. I just loved that. I remember standing the first couple of days just walking around Mount Carroll. I just thought it was a really neat thing.” Riley, who was from a larger metropolitan area, said: “my first visit was definitely a shock, because it was the opposite of anything I had experienced. I had only seen this type of environment in magazines.” At least two people commented on how few televisions there were on campus and their poor reception as something they

thought beneficial. Irv commented, “there were like three televisions on campus” and that he “didn’t watch television one time.” While some acknowledged the drawbacks of the town’s remoteness, they agreed that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages.

Several thought that Shimer’s presence in a small town was critical to the environment. Irv said that if he’d gone to school in Chicago, “there are myriads of distractions. We were forced into this intense and close relationship with our 500 colleagues, because we had nowhere else.” This relative isolation and lack of distractions such as museums and theatres not only helped them stay focused on schoolwork but also reinforced the scholarly community effect. Many students commented on Poffy’s as being a popular venue for discussions that were often extensions of classroom debates, occasionally including faculty. Kathy described “going to Poffy’s, sitting around that informal table, talking about what you’d read and what you thought about things. It was so exciting! It was so good!” Joan said that she “enjoyed everything about Shimer in the sense that there were all those conversations and sort of natural setting of being not really in town or a city but off in this special place.” The distance from larger population centers also meant that few students lived close enough to go home on weekends, which also increased the shared community feeling.

While some enjoyed the distance, they also disliked having to travel to do anything more than attend a movie in Savanna, 7 miles away. Angela complained that “we had to go find somebody that had a car, and go to Savanna, or go to Chicago for the weekend.” Those trips to Chicago to go to a concert or the Art Institute required a 6-hour round trip. Ian said, “the one case where size makes a difference that is a problem for a

school like Shimer, is the library,” which limited the on-campus resources, frustrating to many doing research for their classes. Students who attended Shimer toward the end of the period covered by this study, when about 200 students were enrolled and just before the school left Mount Carroll for Waukegan, thought the college was too small. Olivia said that “there’s that whole social aspect of Shimer being so inbred, and isolated, and after three plus years, I was sick of that.”

Campus Layout. At the start of the period under study, one dormitory had just been completed and the other buildings were all several decades old. The recently completed dormitory also housed McNeal Grill (also known as the grill), a snack bar and lounge area popular in the evenings and between classes for snacks, card games, and just talking. Two new dormitories and a theater were built during the 1960s. With the exception of the few married or local commuter students, all students lived in a dormitory and ate in the single dining hall, as did a few of the faculty.

Joan thought that “everything about the campus and the place was very comforting, and it just seemed like a perfect setting for me.” She also said that she “love[d] all those trees and the quad....” Larry said that he “loved the architecture. I loved the old brick buildings. I loved ... the big old trees, and green grass of the quad.” Irv loved the campus, saying, “it’s almost the Western academia, that quad concept, and the beautiful trees. It was just perfect.” Carol said, “I liked the fact that it was, you know, a small little campus.”

College Size. All of the participants noted that size of the campus and town made positive contributions to their experiences. The size and location coupled with the

described comfort levels made this an ideal environment in which to learn. The small number of students was the most powerful theme in this discussion and came up in other discussion areas as well. There were 210 students enrolled in 1960, at the beginning of the period under study, and 234 in Fall 1973, the latest for which I can find data. Enrollment exceeded 400 from 1964/1965 through the 1966/1967 academic years, peaking at 519 in Fall 1966 (Shimer College, n.d.-c).

The participants liked that the student body was small enough for them all to fit in the dining hall. Al said, “I mean we had a dining hall; we had the whole campus in one room, that’s unbelievable.” Angela said that size “definitely had an effect” and that she’d “have gotten lost in a bigger school.” Irene also commented on the impact of the size, because that “meant you at least tangentially knew just about everybody.”

Jack was impressed that Shimer’s small size allowed him to study Supreme Court decisions in a constitutional law course taught by a lawyer. He said that “it would not have been the same experience if it was a larger school.” Larry said that “not being overwhelmed in a huge school, kind of a nameless, faceless kind of a thing was probably an advantage. I think that was a positive for my education.” Riley said, “it was perfect. People would ask me where did you go to school? Shimer ... it’s 400 hippies and me.” As described later in the section on *Academics Beyond the Curriculum*, Shimer’s small size also facilitated many close relationships between students and the faculty as well as within the student community. Al also noted what he perceived as a drawback to that level of intimacy as students at breakfast would comment on “who came in with who in the morning ... did you have a fight?”

The participants appreciated that the college size allowed a classroom structure in which they sat around a table, expressing their own thoughts while listening and responding to those of their colleagues. They thought that this small-class discussion structure was more important to them than was the course content. Irene said that “the small seminar process was one that once I figured out how to take advantage of it, was one in which I thrived.” Quincy was impressed that students were pushed to “actually explore ideas yourself. They want to know what your ideas are.”

Most of the discussions among the participants about the physical aspects of the environment focused on the location, layout, and size of the college. The idea that Shimer was the “ideal vision” of a college because of its location, layout, and size was an overriding theme in the participants’ discussion of the physical environment. Overall, the effect of the campus environment was a critical aspect of their time at Shimer with minimal effect on the participants’ post-Shimer lives, providing an answer to my first research question.

Curriculum

Shimer’s curriculum required the completion of 24 courses, of which 18 were the required general courses, additional courses to meet a concentration requirement, and 9 integrative comprehensive examinations. The 18 general courses consisted of 4 each in Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences, plus courses in Analysis (1), Mathematics (2), History (2), and Philosophy (1). The comprehensive examinations covered material from multiple courses, with some also spanning multiple disciplines, and were in Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Analysis, Rhetoric, History,

Logic, Foreign Language, and Philosophy. A diagram of the curriculum design is in Appendix D.

The courses had heavy reading requirements from original source material. For example, Humanities II in Fall 1967 required over 30 poems, 6 plays, 4 novels, and several short stories. Students were expected to write 7 papers with minimum lengths ranging from 250 to 1000 words. The students were also expected to write a sonnet in either Italian or Shakespearean style. Each class also had a final exam based on the course content and other assigned material with both multiple choice and essay questions. Other courses had similar requirements.

Each class met twice a week for 80 minutes as a discussion class. Some courses also had a 50-minute lecture session shared by all sections of that course. The discussion sections typically had about a dozen students who sat around a square table with the instructor sitting somewhere among the students. The instructor would typically ask a question about a section of the day's assigned reading and the class would then engage in a debate on that topic.

Learning How to Learn. Almost everyone credited the curriculum with helping them learn how to learn. Learning to learn was among the most common concepts voiced in the interviews, which elevated it to a theme. The constant heavy reading and writing workloads taught them how to read more effectively and to become better writers. Al thought “the reading was fundamental, the emphasis on writing was powerful.” He also shared that “at Shimer, the readings, the teachers, and then, of course, what we call

learning community, all kind of came together for me to help me learn how to learn.”

Olivia said,

the most meaningful to me was I think the learning how to.... And I won't say I didn't know how to think because I did know how to think but learning really in depth how to think for myself, and figure things out, and express those thoughts.

Participants also commented on the analytical skills they developed while at Shimer.

Olivia went on to describe the process:

It wasn't just think, it was analyze, it was read closely and figure out what's being said, and then analyze and try to either figure out what you think. Can you support this yourself; can you pick it apart, can you pick their arguments apart? And also, then to synthesize it yourself and then express it, and synthesize it with other things that you've read and figure out the big picture. So it was the whole analysis and synthesis thing.

Irene thought “that the message of the Shimer curriculum and approach is that if you take on anything with rational thought and care and depth you can figure it out.” Irv “liked the analysis, the way of breaking things down” and used Max Weber's writing as an example, saying that he “found that to be very useful to me in writing afterwards.”

These examples show how the participants, as students, learned to apply the skills developed in earlier courses to help them master the more complex material covered in later courses.

The participants remembered and valued Shimer's exclusive use of original source materials in their classes and the need to read and analyze those original sources

instead of reading a textbook or other material that described and interpreted that material for them. Jack said that that “the whole classroom setup and the dynamics of the classroom were probably as important, in some respects, more important than the content of the class itself” (Appendix L). Al described a course on government in which the students were:

reading the Federalist Papers, and Locke, and you know, that course particularly, with all their, you know, 18, 17, however old they were, their opinions about government, what government ought to be and so forth. It was just a collision I’ve never forgotten it. So that was kind of daily life at Shimer.

The classes were all open discussion, which the participants said they liked. Olivia said, “what really helped was having to come up with my own ideas.” Riley “liked the idea of being able to say what I thought.” Pete claimed that what he and “virtually every Shimer student who’s stuck it out and many who only were there for a short while came with, is the ability for critical analysis. Knowing how to ask questions.”

They also described the curriculum as being a series of constantly changing challenges, an environment in which some thrived. Kathy said that she:

needed a constant source of challenge, which is, again, what I had at Shimer.

Shimer constantly challenged me. Just when you think you knew sociology because you had it in Soc 2, you got into something at Soc 3 that was way beyond you, and you had to go figure it out. I love that kind of challenge.

The exams were also described as learning experiences. Larry said that he “walked out of the integrative exams and realized I actually learned something from it.... That’s pretty

bizarre, at least from my experience from an exam.” Ian said that one thing he “learned was to get to the heart of something and actually simplify the problem” and that if he “got to the very roots of it, I could grasp it, and everything else I could figure out from there.” The participants all seemed to agree that the focus on learning to think and learn independently was a major contributor to their success while students as well as during their later lives, responding to both of my research questions.

Interconnectedness. Another theme was the holistic effect of the connectedness of the courses. The participants thought that learning new concepts as part of this integrated approach led not only to increased knowledge, but also to changes in their perspective. Al described Shimer as being “designed to be connected” and said that for him, “it flowed, the Shimer experience in connecting what happens in classrooms, what happens when you’re studying.” Larry liked “that three-quarters of what you had were required courses and they were integrated. The exams were deliberately integrated. I just think that’s the essence of Shimer, is connecting things with other things.”

They discussed the way the courses were all designed to be connected and not just as a course sequence within a specific discipline. Carol contrasted Shimer’s education with her high school experiences and described the cross-disciplinary approaches,

like learning that each discipline has its own language and a way of using words.

That they don’t always use the same words, in the same way and I liked that kind of way of looking at the world, I guess.

The entire curriculum was described as being interconnected, with social sciences, humanities, and science all being linked together in a meaningful and deliberate structure. Quincy “thought it was a good idea to expose people to the full in the compass of human learning and social studies, humanities, natural sciences. With mathematics and philosophy coming in somewhere in that mix.” According to Zoe, she “realized that you could understand historical times or scientific revolutions by reading literature. That was quite enlightening, like Dickens.”

Larry said that at Shimer was “the first time I realized that everything is connected to everything else. Science is connected to history, history is connected to literature, everything flows through.” He gave an example of this connectedness in practice as used in a test at Shimer:

It literally was one of my comprehensive exam questions that you are the Boy Scout leader of a troop that has just donated a print of Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* to the local library. You just finished reading Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Write the speech that you will give at the library.

Ian said that “the core of what you were learning, one of the objectives was that they were trying to teach you that things cross fields and go across disciplines.” Jack said: it’s one of the things I’ve got say was really critical. I never really thought about it, but the progression of the presentation and the development of kind of the syntheses of all the threads, as well as the integration of integrative classes and then the comps. There was a lot of thought put into that and I think it was an important part of the experience.

Olivia thought it “was central to Shimer. The fact that three-quarters of what you had were required courses, and they were integrated.” She liked that it made her “study things I wouldn’t have studied otherwise.”

The two major themes that emerged from the discussion on curriculum-related questions were that the participants learned how to learn and that the interconnectedness of the various disciplines across the curriculum helped them understand that learning was not just being able to spout back facts but to interpret issues. They learned to learn by being forced to read original source material, to write about what they had read, and to develop and defend their own interpretations in writing and in class. The interconnectedness or integration of the various disciplines was demonstrated by Larry’s description of a question on one of the comprehensive examinations. The participants felt that learning that everything is connected helped them as they moved through the curriculum and its integrated comprehensive exams. The participants credited these two themes, learning how to learn and the interconnectedness of multiple disciplines, with helping them navigate not only their coursework at Shimer, but also future life challenges in the workplace.

Academics Beyond the Curriculum

While the physical and formal curricular aspects of the college are obvious factors of the environment, other elements also affected the participants. Interactions between students and faculty are critical to academic success, while peer relationships, established in the dormitories, classrooms, and campus gathering spots, also have important effects. Some of the student–student relationships survive to this day. Shimer’s size and

discussion-oriented classes fostered a learning environment that extended beyond the classroom to other venues.

Relationships. Close relationships with faculty and with fellow students was a topic described by all of the participants as very important. Participants described interacting with the teachers in the dining hall, the grill, Poffy's, and faculty houses as being an important part of their Shimer experience that contributed to their education. Joan said that she "enjoyed the relationships with faculty and also staff" and specifically mentioned talking to the bookstore manager and the head of the business office. The atmosphere at Poffy's provided other opportunities to chat not only with other students, but also with faculty and Shimer staff members. Kathy described the interactions at Poffy's as being with "people I could talk to. People who knew the same language. People who had read the same books."

Student–Faculty Relationships. Relationships with faculty members were a critical aspect of the student experiences at Shimer according to participants in my study. Participants frequently described teachers as treating them more like colleagues during class discussions than like students. Pete described one such relationship with a faculty member:

We went to her house, right across the street from the campus, once a week and it was wonderful, it was just wonderful having that intimate social contact as opposed to classroom contact that made a hell of a difference, it seemed much more comfortable conversing and the barriers between faculty and students were

just not nearly as daunting, I think, as the formalism of big university, big school environments.... The community of scholars' context was literally in effect. Joseph said that the professors "treated me not just as a student but as a friend. They gave me special assistance when I needed special assistance."

Carol said there were "definitely, I think, pretty decent student-faculty relationships" and that some might have been "crossing boundaries" when they hosted parties that allowed under-age students to drink. She talked about gatherings at an instructor's house to listen to music with other faculty and students. Jack said student-faculty relationships were "really important" and liked being able to "hang out and chat or run into somebody at the grill or in town."

Faculty would also frequently eat in the campus dining room or go the grill mid-day or in the evenings and engage in conversations with students there. The participants enjoyed these opportunities to get know the "adult" members of the Shimer community as people without the intermediation present in classrooms or other structured campus settings. Pete observed: "Shimer had probably ... closer student-faculty opportunities to bond directly, to not be intermediated by the institutional." Carol noted that one teacher regularly invited students to his house for dinner and that he even hosted Carol's 21st birthday party there. She also mentioned another teacher having students over to listen to his music collection. Pete and the other participants describe these interactions as being much more comfortable and less subject to the formalities they experienced at other schools they attended.

The participants' interactions with faculty had their major effect while the participants were in school. They thought the relationships they formed with faculty were extremely important to their academic success in the program. As described by the participants, this may have been their first almost peer interaction with an adult, especially in the discussion classes. These responses thus provided another answer to my first research question, that about aspects that affected the participants while students.

Student–Student Relationships. The small student population fostered deep relationships among the students. With everyone eating meals in the same dining hall, participants said they knew many more people than those in their classes. One participant described the campus as being more of a cloistered community, with little interaction with the Mount Carroll residents other than those they met at Poffy's. Ian said that "when I got to Shimer, I met people from all over the country." The Shimer campus was described as being a bounded community in which the participants met and engaged with people from across the country, many of whom had different experiences and interests. Quincy said this "was very important because you felt you were part of a community, the bounds of which you could see, the population of which you could know. It was like living in a small village."

Joseph said that "Shimer was the best. I mean everybody knew everybody. You knew the faculty, you had classes of six to nine students." Kathy agreed, saying that "the advantage of a small school was that you knew all kinds of people, not just the people who you saw in your classes ... you also saw the normal side of them." Quincy discussed "very intense relationships that lasted all my life" in an environment he felt was "a very

cloistered community ... just like on a desert island somewhere.” The small-college and small-town environment seemed ideal for fostering those relationships.

Participants described their campus colleagues as being very smart, interesting, and always engaging. A few people felt that for the first time in their lives they were with students who were as smart as they were, if not smarter. Irv enjoyed being “surrounded by people who were smarter than I was ... talking nonstop, they were just so excited.” Irene thought “the fact that it was small and yet there was a high percentage of very bright and interesting people there ... was crucial.” Ian said, “a lot of the people who showed up at Shimer were very talented, they were creative, interested, and they have very active minds and they were—they had high IQs and were just smart.”

Upon arriving on campus, Irene said to herself, “Oh boy, there are other people like me in the world ... other smart, Midwestern kids, who didn’t fit in wherever they came from, and we all fit in this motley crew that was the entering class of Shimer.” Early entrants, some of whom had skipped a grade in their earlier schooling, described their happiness to be treated like everyone else there, not as outliers. Quincy said that he discovered “that the world of relationships and people was filled with endless variety, and challenge, and interest, and joy, and sorrow, and pain and all kinds of things.” Irene described “meeting a variety of interesting people with interesting obsessions, and talents, and whatever.”

Student–student relationships were helped by Shimer’s requirement that all but married and local students live on campus in dormitories, an experience some participants described as important. They had to learn to get along with a roommate and

with other students living in their dormitory and especially on the same floor. Joan described living in the dormitory as a major change in her life after living with her mother and sister. Joan said she:

enjoyed very much the dormitory life because of being with a group of, back then in Dezendorf, the group of women I was living with and talking with friends in the wee hours and so forth. I enjoyed the kind of personal discoveries of how to be people together that I hadn't really experienced.

Some described late night discussions that they felt led to more meaningful relationships than they experienced later in life.

Participants discussed how their relationships at Shimer changed their perspectives about relationships after leaving school. Kathy said that she "never again found relationships as meaningful as at Shimer." She added that Shimer "spoiled me for friendships." Others felt that being around the people at Shimer set higher standards for future relationships. Olivia said that "I really can't stand to be around people who are really ignorant" and that she likes "to have discussions with people about their ideas, and listen to what their ideas are, and challenge them, and have them challenge me, and talk about stuff." Olivia said that people with whom she talks "can't just arbitrarily say something and not be able to defend it." Others discussed wanting only friends who are able to carry on a meaningful and rational conversation.

The development of relationships was a frequent topic among the participants. They found it easy to develop close relationships with their fellow students because of their common interests connected to their studies and to their curiosity and mental agility.

The college size and isolation, as discussed in the section on the physical environment, emerged as a major contributing factor to the development of their relationships with faculty and other students.

Student organized activities such as clubs are another aspect of student–student relationships but were mentioned only peripherally in the interviews. Quincy and Irene both commented about belonging to a political group that brought in controversial speakers, including George Lincoln Rockwell, the head of the American Nazi Party. Quincy said they “wanted to study him. He thought he was being given a platform. ... We conducted it in a very controlled and civilized manner ... with questions in written form.” Other students found some commonality in being proud of the college basketball team, which set a national record for consecutive losses, and joined together to form a cheerleading group, more as a joke than anything. Joseph said that “once you go to Shimer, it’s a cult. I know very few people that don’t look back at their Shimer days in a very favorable way.”

The student–student relationships were not only described as important while the participants were students, but also important in their post-Shimer years. The participants discussed their ongoing connections with people with whom they attended Shimer decades ago. They also expanded on how the types of relationships they formed while in school affected the relationships formed in their subsequent lives. The participants’ student–student relationship descriptions provided another answer to both of my research questions, given the effect on the participants while students as well as after they left Shimer.

Learning Outside the Classroom. While Shimer's curriculum was noted as being a critical part of the participants' experience, there were other aspects of learning than those tied explicitly to the curriculum. Shimer's learning environment transcended the curriculum and the classroom. Al said that for him, "it flowed, the Shimer experience in connecting what happens in classrooms, what happens when you're studying, struggling, everybody struggles with something, you're in the dorm, there's not much else to do."

Classroom discussions continued beyond the classroom to the dining hall, where one participant described an argument over the philosophy class the students had just left, with one student reported to have jumped on the table shouting, "That's not what Spinoza said!" Other less vociferous course-related discussions occurred in the evenings in the campus student snack bar or in Poffy's. Some participants described spontaneous 1 a.m. discussions on esoteric topics in lounges where they were studying to avoid bothering their roommates. Joan said that "it's much more the how does it feel in your soul to be discussing these ideas with other people, more the experience of working together on the projects than the ideas of the intellect themselves."

Kathy said that the small size of the college encouraged class attendance. She found this so critical to her time at Shimer that as a teacher,

I've told my own students about you couldn't skip a class at Shimer. If you skipped your morning class and went to the grill for breakfast, you'd meet your professor there when the class had finished, and he'd want to know if you were all

right. Were you sick? So it was a personal relationship where they knew everybody. They knew what you did, where you were.

Other participants also commented on the need to attend all classes because they felt they would be letting down the other class members by not being there to participate and share their thoughts.

There was one interesting observation about the overall Shimer experience. Larry said that one thing “that was really good is that you could natter away at things that were really quite subtle differences.” He commented that:

the shades of subtlety, maybe it is the shades of gray or whatever, are not universally recognized by most of the world. So, I think maybe one of the lessons is that a lot of the things that you were able to do in that environment in terms of discussion, in terms of looking at things, are fairly rare out in the real world away from Shimer.

He continued to say, “things are more black and white, there's less tolerance for ambiguity” outside of Shimer and that “unfortunately, in many ways, that’s not the way the rest of the world works.”

Overall, the participants felt that the learning process went beyond the readings, writing, and classroom work. The small college environment coupled with a feeling of isolation from the outside world allowed class conversations to extend into non-class related space and time. That everyone took the same courses and read the same material through their tenure at Shimer meant a shared knowledge base that also fostered those conversations. This concept of the extension of the learning process beyond the

classroom builds on the previously mentioned theme on the integrated nature of the curriculum. While not part of the curriculum design, the small-college environment seemed designed to foster the connected nature of the curriculum into the non-academic spaces.

Outcomes

Astin's I-E-O model describes the "O" as referring "to the student's characteristics *after* exposure to the environment" (1993, p. 7). This part of the framework aligns perfectly with my second research question that asked how the participants' experience at Shimer affected their subsequent lives over the 40+ years since they attended the college. Three major topics surfaced in our interviews: an increase in the participants' self-confidence, their post-Shimer college attendance, and their career trajectories. Each is addressed in the following sections.

Post-Shimer Outcomes

Self-Confidence. Almost all of the participants discussed the self-confidence they gained from their Shimer experience. They credited the requirement to speak extemporaneously in class on material they had just read, to think for themselves, and to defend those thoughts as a basis for their increased self-confidence. They also discussed learning critical analysis skills: how to ask questions, dissect an argument, synthesize the subject, understand people's reactions, and prepare an effective persuasive oral or written response. One described the Shimer experience as providing him not with a manual for

getting through school and work challenges, but with a toolset that was advantageous to him in his workplace interactions.

Post-Shimer Personal Changes. Participants described several personal changes for which they credit their Shimer experiences. They described their experience as liberating them and forcing them to see the world differently. Joseph said that “Shimer opened my eyes and increased my horizons.” He added, “I became very outgoing. I was very much an introvert before I went to Shimer.”

Some of the participants described more personal changes they experienced while at Shimer. Olivia said, “yeah, I think the questioning, I think that became me. It became the way I think and the way I act.” Pete said that he came out of Shimer “knowing how to ask questions.” One described how the Shimer focus on questioning readings in classes led to questioning the effect of rules in other situations, applying the same concepts of critical analysis to other rules in place.

Participants described growing up at Shimer and learning how to live their lives, with some students entering as 15- or 16-year-old adolescents and leaving as adults. Carol said, “it was definitely a sudden growing up time, that many students don’t get today when they go to college.” Jack thought that “the growing up experience was embodied” in the non-classroom environment.

Several brought up the increased self-confidence they developed while at Shimer, saying that at Shimer they learned they could do anything. Irv said he discovered at Shimer “that I was really actually very good at something.” Quincy said that Shimer gave him “the intellectual self-confidence that I had, I could use my mind to understand things,

to express things, to contend with people in the world of ideas.” Riley said that attending Shimer made him “confident in his point of view.”

Many of the participants found that their self-confidence had increased as a result of their time at Shimer. They felt that it was less the actual courses that contributed to that feeling than the approach used. Irene described a conversation with a Shimer friend who thought that “doing anything with clarity and tension and deeply then makes you more equipped to do anything else that way too.” Joan said she “had a new kind of confidence” because she “knew that I knew my stuff.” When asked by a prospective employer if she could do what they wanted, a field she had not been in, her response was, “Well, there’s no question. Of course I can.” She said that she “had a new kind of confidence by then.” Al felt that he had the “foundation to go do whatever you want.”

Joseph said that he left Shimer as an “oral communicator with great confidence” and that, as a result of the Shimer program, he “gained confidence, self-respect.” He added that Shimer “laid the groundwork for me to have the confidence and strength” to perform in his business careers. If he had not attended Shimer, Joseph said, “I don’t think I would have gained the confidence that I have today.” He also said, “I think Shimer, you talk about Shimer giving you the self-confidence. Shimer gave me the confidence so I could tackle new things.”

Kathy had to teach a course for which she had no prior learning or experience by going “back to the book,” getting “tons of books and journal articles and all kinds of stuff and learned it” to prepare the course. She once joked that “I went to Shimer, where I learned I could do anything” and then credited Shimer with forcing her to read so much

new material that she was “able to read just about everything.” She said she has “a self confidence that not everybody has, and I credit Shimer with that.”

Olivia thought that by the time she left, she “really felt like I had gained a lot of self-confidence,” which “helped me prepare for grad school. And actually for later on too. For my whole career.” Quincy said that Shimer “had a profound effect on me. It gave me intellectual confidence that I had, I could use my mind to understand things, to express things, to contend with people in the world of ideas.”

The idea of self-confidence came across implicitly in many of the interviews and the phrase was used by only a couple of the participants. The Shimer program, with its focus on discussion classes requiring students to master the material being studied sufficiently well to formulate and defend an opinion on the spot helped them feel able to tackle most job challenges. The integrated comprehensive exams required them to think beyond the constraints in many subject domains and prepared them to see problems from a “big-picture” perspective instead of focusing on a narrow question. This ability to master new material and to see problems holistically increased and reinforced their self-confidence. The reported increase in their confidence levels is probably the strongest theme to arise from the interviews and is an important additional answer to my second research question.

The participants all agreed on the positive effects on their lives of the time they spent at Shimer. They have found that their friends in later life are people not only with common interests, but also with common thought processes. When making new friends, they tend to look for people with interesting minds or who are doing interesting work.

The participants credited the variety of people at Shimer, despite its small size, as providing a basis for their future socializing, skills some had not known prior to attending the college. The friendships formed while at Shimer were very intense, and many have lasted their entire lives, since they think they have more in common with people originally encountered 50 years before than with those they met later. They felt that their experiences at Shimer spoiled them for future relationships because of their high expectations that others demonstrate both knowledge and a broad range of interests.

Irene said that Shimer gave her “a groundwork for a different kind of socializing than I had known how to do before” and that “was organized around having interesting conversations about ideas that matter.” Quincy said that for him, “Shimer was like cracking open an egg or breaking out of a cocoon. They provided the matrix within which I discovered I could become something other than this enclosed, shy, hesitant person that I’d been up ‘til then.” These three participants credited Shimer with having helped them more towards maturity.

The skills taught in the Shimer curriculum, such as critical thinking and problem solving, prepared the participants to learn on their own. Kathy said that she learned:

To be sure of myself. To think on my feet. To know how to communicate. To know how to empathize. To be able to talk to anyone at any level in any place. And to listen to other people. To listen to several people and synthesize the arguments. To know and state my own opinion on something and defend it.

Riley thought that Shimer taught him to “explain things and realize that I’m not the only one in the room who knows everything.”

The participants described Shimer people as having a different way of looking at things and Riley cited an adage popular among some Shimer alumni that “Shimer people don’t have to explain jokes to other Shimer people.” Carol said that being at Shimer “helped learning to work with lots of different people who think differently.” Zoe said that after leaving school, she

would talk to people and I might then reference whatever the topic, social topic that was going on. Whether it was about cities and war or different things, poverty or something and then I might mention an author or subject I had studied, and people would respond to that as if it was unusual. I thought it was what we did. It was everyday conversation at Shimer or with people from Shimer, it wasn’t a big deal. I started realizing that is something of interest to other people and ... things that were ordinary at Shimer were extraordinary elsewhere.

She also noted that one person told her that she “talk[ed] in metaphors.” The participants claimed to have more confidence and valuing themselves more as a result of their time at Shimer. Kathy said that she “learned to question all authority” and others pointed out that has led to frustration with constraints, especially when being told they couldn’t do something. Olivia said that she was “willing to challenge the rules ... and get them changed.”

Many of the participants described multiple changes for which they credit their time at Shimer, including the effects on their personal relationships and interests. However, the strongest theme to come out of the discussions was an increased self-confidence. Many of the participants came across as actually cocky about their

accomplishments because they felt they could tackle anything that life, school, or work threw their way.

Skill Set Growth. An overarching theme in the interviews discussing the participants' lives after Shimer was that Shimer's program helped them succeed in graduate school and in the workplace. The rigors of the program prepared them for the demands they faced after Shimer. The skills they learned and honed at Shimer in reading, writing, speaking, and analyzing helped them in those subsequent endeavors. They also came out of Shimer with the self-confidence to overcome whatever unexpected challenges they faced.

Post-Shimer College Attendance. All of the 16 participants attended another college after leaving Shimer. Four did not graduate from Shimer and completed their education elsewhere, with three also earning graduate degrees. Of the 12 participants who did graduate from Shimer, all but three earned graduate degrees.

Some of the participants who went on to graduate school credited their experiences at Shimer with helping them get through graduate school. Carol felt that "after Shimer, grad school was a breeze." Almost all of the participants said that Shimer's program taught them to read, analyze, and write effectively, skills they found very helpful in graduate school. Pete thought Shimer's attitude was that "we prepared you to think and how to be a good academician and do the formal stuff ... you'll do well in grad school because you can think on your feet and you can write well." At least one participant even credited Shimer for helping with graduate school admissions tests. Larry said, "when I

got to grad school, I was one of the people who knew how to read a book ... you developed a way to read and analyze that stuff.”

Post-Shimer Career Flexibility and Preparedness. Many of the participants entered Shimer with no specific career goals; teaching was the goal mentioned by most who had any preference. The participants who became teachers said they used their Shimer experiences as a model for their own teaching endeavors, sometimes to the surprise of their peers and students. Some of the participants who started in teaching moved to other fields after finding other opportunities.

Many of the participants credited the Shimer program with giving them the self-confidence to try new and different domains in the workplace. More than half of the participants worked in at least three completely different fields, and five of them pursued careers in five to seven different domains. Shimer people seem to think they can and will do anything they set their mind to. Quincy, who has had multiple careers, said that he “never had a plan. I just decide what I want to do next.”

The participants said that the Shimer program taught them how to gather data, analyze situations, understand different points of view, speak extemporaneously, write effectively, and solve problems. In an interesting paradox, they felt that while the Shimer program did not prepare them for any specific career, it actually prepared them to do anything. Olivia said that Shimer taught her about “taking a problem and figuring it out. And yeah, that’s pretty much what I did my whole career in whatever job I had. And whatever field you’re in. That’s pretty important.” Al, who eventually ran a degree program at a university, noted that he “hadn’t done anything in my whole life that I’m

like, you know, official I'm prepared to do. I'm not qualified to do anything, not one thing." Jack thought that the:

kind of fundamental learning that you got at Shimer was this education that was eminently reusable. The basic lessons that you learned were applicable in a bunch of places.... At Shimer just about every class you find sooner or later you're going to use something from that class.

Carol said that "I'm a basic liberal arts person and being a [medical] practitioner is a liberal arts kind of thing and deal with people." She added that her work was "all about learning how to interview people and learning how to draw out what it is they want. And I think Shimer was helpful to that in terms of understanding different points of view." Irv said that some Shimer alumni went into computers, a nascent field at the time of their graduation, although they had no field-specific training, because "they knew they could figure it out. They knew they could approach it." Angela taught for a while and then returned to school to go into business management. She taught as a graduate assistant and stayed in college teaching her entire career. Irv said that "I can write, and I can speak extemporaneously. That helped me a great deal in my subsequent careers."

Jack taught right after graduating as a way to avoid being drafted. After that threat ended, he worked for multiple large companies doing work in quality control. He explained how his Shimer education came into play when he worked for a technology company. Jack described a meeting with his company's CEO and senior staff at which Jack "suggested an approach to something and everybody else, the technicians, the engineers, it's not going to work, we can't do that, da, da, da." Jack said the CEO

interrupted the discussion, pointed at Jack and said, “This guy is educated. The rest of you were trained.” The CEO then said that Jack “understands the root of the problem” by way of explaining that problem solving requires the ability to see problems from a larger perspective, something Jack claimed he learned at Shimer.

Kathy said Shimer prepared her for teaching because “I saw good teaching. I experienced it. I knew what it was. I knew what it took. If it could get somebody as shy as me out of my shell and talking, surely it would work on other people.” She also said that no one should ever tell a Shimer person he or she couldn’t do something as that would just be seen as a challenge to do it. Irene, another participant who went into teaching as a career, said that she found herself “thinking more expansively about how to make sure as a teacher [that] I was creating a classroom that was welcoming, not just for the super-intellectual readers.”

Irene said that the program gave “you the feeling that you know you’ve got the foundation to go do whatever you want to do.” She added that absent the foundation, “you’ve got the skills to go figure out what pieces you’re missing and find where they are and get them in place and then go on.” Kathy said that “when you need to know something, read. Read, read, read, read, read, read and then read more.” Joan said that her education left her mind open to new approaches:

Well I think my mind is pretty open to. ... Here’s a problem. What am I going to do now? I think that I’m open to more areas like not just think there’s only one way to do this but almost like having a row of ideas or a row of books. Or there’s not just one way; there is a panoply of possibilities. And I think of that as being a

Shimerian. ... It's almost as though I see the quad and think all those doors that might be open to the quad. So where do I want to go because of this particular problem? So I think of it as kind of a broadening way of being open to possibilities.

Jack also described how he used the skills he learned at Shimer as "trying to divine the truth of what you're reading and understanding." He said this helped with resolving quality control problems because "it's not enough to just know you have a quality problem, you have to begin to understand why you have the quality problem. And understand it not just at a superficial level."

Study participants noted that every class at Shimer provided them with skills they have found useful through life, whether in the workplace or in personal interactions. Olivia said that "I'm willing to question anything. I always do question everything. I'm not going to just accept the easy way; I'm always going to turn over this side and that side and try to figure it all out." Pete described how Shimer affected his approach to work situations:

it's being able to go into a situation, analyze the situation, whether it be a job situation, whatever activity or social interaction you're having, and be able to do a fairly good arm's length analysis of, well, what's going on here? Why are people acting this way, why are these the precepts? What are the precepts? You walk into a new job and you go, well, why do they do these things? And why do they do them this way, and what's the objective here?

Pete thought the success of Shimer students was because “Shimer students were given a, not a manual, a set of tools.” Joan and Jack both discussed analyzing problems in the workplace and not producing what was wanted. Jack said that he was “known for not being a person who drew snap conclusions, which in some businesses I worked for was a problem because they wanted an answer now and I wasn’t really ... ready to give them an answer now.” Joan noted that “being a Shimerian is partly in my thinking, the fact that I see it as a range of solutions rather than there’s only one way to fix this. It never seems to me as if there’s only one answer.”

The discussion of post-Shimer employment produced an overarching message of preparedness. While the Shimer program did not prepare them for jobs in any specific field, they said that the integrated multi-discipline approach gave them self-learning skills to move into careers in almost any field that interested them. The interviews revealed that most participants had entered Shimer with no specific career goals and that some with goals moved on to other fields than they had originally considered. Many of the participants have transitioned through multiple careers since leaving school and they credit their Shimer education with preparing them to adapt to those changes.

Participants cited many ways that their experience at Shimer changed them. The reading, critical analysis, and communications skills they developed at Shimer helped them adapt and thrive during a series of decades that saw changes in many areas. The participants found their perspective had become broader and the deep friendships they developed at Shimer led them to attempt to replicate those relationships after leaving

school. These discussions of post-Shimer effects provided additional answers to my second research question.

Summary

The participants were extremely forthcoming in their responses during the interviews and were voluble about their own personal experiences and feelings, both retrospectively and about their current situations. They demonstrated a great facility for detailed recall about events that occurred a half-century earlier as well as an ability to describe places some had not seen since leaving Shimer. The participants were open in describing their feelings and personal changes they had undergone during their lives. Their willingness to help with this study extended to participants sending follow-up thoughts, some very detailed, and to reviewing and revising some of the interview transcripts. This cooperation produced the detailed information needed for this research.

The participants chose to attend Shimer either to escape uncomfortable home situations or because they were attracted by Shimer's program, as described in the Push–Pull theme. The physical environment, described as ideal and comprising the campus location, layout, and size, had its primary effect on the participants while they were students, with some carry-over effects into their later lives. The curriculum, with its small class discussion model and requirement for students to articulate and defend their opinions, also had its major effect during their time as students. The curriculum design led to two themes that encompassed an appreciation for courses that integrated multiple disciplines and required massive amounts of reading and writing. The effects of that rigorous curriculum extended beyond their time at Shimer to their time in graduate school

and in the workplace. A concept that spanned both their time at Shimer and their subsequent lives was that of increased self-confidence. The participants also described after-Shimer effects on personal relationships.

All seemed to feel that their experience at Shimer had a positive effect on their lives. They enjoyed the campus, the small-town environment, and interacting with their fellow students. All thought the curriculum coupled with small discussion classes was a major factor in their appreciation for the college.

V. Analysis and Conclusions

I started this research because I asked myself a simple question after connecting to long-ago college friends on Facebook: How did so many people who attended a Great Books school, at which we read only original source materials and had no technology, wind up in technology fields? My question was based not on just a few people who were “techies” doing coding or management, but on several people who had developed a reputation in the field, including one graduate who worked for Bell Labs and wrote the electronic music on the “golden CD” on the Voyager space craft and another who helped develop the closed-captioning standard.

When I started my doctoral program, I reconsidered this question and I realized that it was too narrowly focused. Looking at the profiles of other friends, I realized that my tiny liberal-arts college had turned out some people with surprising accomplishments, a few of whom had become well-known in their fields, not solely in technology. That realization led me to broaden my question a few times, and after multiple discussions with my adviser, to focus on two linked research questions: What aspects of their experiences at Shimer affected them the most while they were students and what aspects affected them the most in their post-college lives?

I wanted the questions to be fairly broad as most of the studies on how college affects students seemed to consider only a few specific attributes, such as political

activities or changes in religious practices. In addition, most of the previous studies did not extend beyond 10 to 20 years after college attendance, and I hoped that a longer-term retrospective might provide more insight into what was considered important. There is no argument that college has an effect on the lives of its graduates (Astin, 1977), but I wanted to allow my participants to apply their own judgment on the factors and effects they considered important.

As I discussed earlier, I attended Shimer College from 1966 to 1969, but did not graduate from the college. Like many of my participants, I enjoyed the physical environment: the traditional-looking brick campus with lots of grass and trees, the Norman Rockwell small town, and the fact that the campus and college were small enough to feel you knew almost everyone. Unlike my big-city high school, which had more students than Mount Carroll's population, Shimer was small and friendly enough that the college's business manager could (and did) take the time to show me how the college's master key system worked.

Shimer's educational program intrigued me as well. Unlike my earlier education, where everything had to fit in specific categories and our answers to questions had to align with the way topics were presented in our textbooks, Shimer's program encouraged independent thinking and linking ideas from different subjects. Although I left Shimer before I had time to complete the full curriculum, I gained a great deal from the Shimer approach to learning. Not everyone with whom I later interacted appreciated when I challenged others' proposed solutions with a more holistic approach, much as I described in chapter 4 from Jack's interview. And just as my participants described, I also

approached life and work challenges with an increased self-confidence that I could figure out how to do anything.

In this chapter, I will attempt to link the themes developed from my participants' interviews to previous research. As a qualitative researcher, I interpreted these themes through the lens of my own experiences at Shimer and subsequent school and work experiences. As a former Shimer student, I applied my familiarity with the topics raised by the participants to ask more probing questions on their initial comments. As I moved to later interviews, I was able to use a form of triangulation by mentioning a comment from another participants' interview (without attribution to maintain confidentiality) to stimulate recall. I was also able to use my own workplace experiences as analogies to help get more detailed information from my participants. I found the interviews to be enlightening as I learned more about the people who attended Shimer at different times and how their experiences affected them.

Research Process

Using a case study methodology, I interviewed 16 people who attended Shimer College between 1960 and 1976. Some of the participants had been friends with whom I attended Shimer in the late 1960s, some were people I had "met" on Facebook, and others were people not on Facebook, who were referred by the other participants. This approach provided some diversity among the participants. I especially wanted the referrals of people not on social media because I thought that including only people who use social media would eliminate those who did not like technology or did not use social media. However, I was unable to discern any difference in attitudes towards change

among the subgroup of non-Facebook users. Other demographic information about the participants is in Appendix H.

One concern about interviewing people about events and environments from over 40 years ago was the potential for inaccuracy and inability to recall detail. Although my research indicated that memories of adolescence tend to be stronger than those of other periods, showing that “people recall a disproportionate number of autobiographical memories from that period” (Rubin et al., 1998, p. 3), I was still a bit nervous about how successful my interviews would be. As it turned out, my participants were able to recall details about the events from their time at Shimer, as the literature suggested. Many of the interview discussions corroborated those from other participants. Most of the memories discussed were about pleasant occurrences, a pattern identified in my literature review, which said that memories from college-age people are predominantly happy and that sad events were usually not remembered (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004).

The participants all seemed eager to help with my research, were cooperative in scheduling interviews, and, once started on a topic, kept talking and recalling situations on their own. A few participants sent me follow-up notes or detailed comments on the interview transcripts when I asked the participants to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. This member checking was one way to assess the trustworthiness of my research. Two participants also sent me detailed comments beyond or reinforcing what was said in the actual interview.

Analysis Process

After updating the transcripts with my participants' corrections, I imported them (and the supplemental comments from two participants) into NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software tool, and used NVivo to code the transcripts. After coding the transcripts, I used a descriptive framework strategy to produce five categories. I then applied an iterative process and the flexibility of NVivo to consolidate the original 30 threads to 8 themes.

After completing that analysis of the transcripts to identify categories and themes, I decided to use Astin's "I-E-O" model as an overarching framework for my subsequent work. As I discussed earlier, the "I" stands for the "inputs" or the students' initial characteristics, the "E" is for the "environment" that encompasses all aspect of the students' experiences while in college, and the "O" represents the "outcomes," their post-college characteristics. This model provided an excellent scaffold for my analysis.

I created five categories that fit within Astin's model:

- reasons for attending Shimer College
- physical environment
- curriculum
- academics beyond the curriculum
- post-Shimer outcomes

As I analyzed the transcripts for patterns, eight strong themes emerged:

- Push–Pull—why the participants chose to attend Shimer College
- ideal vision—the perception of Shimer's physical environment

- learning how to learn—an aspect of the curriculum
- interconnectedness—an aspect of the curriculum
- relationships—encompassing the various relationships formed at Shimer
- learning outside the classroom—an aspect of the overall environment
- self-confidence—developed and enhanced during and after Shimer attendance
- skill set growth—another theme carried through their subsequent lives

I will discuss each of the categories and themes below in detail. As a check on my choice of categories, I am also including a discussion of seven aspects of a college environment as identified by Arthur Chickering (1993). That analysis will be in the environment section of this paper.

Inputs

In Astin's model, inputs are the characteristics of the entering students. Of the 16 participants, four were first generation students, roughly aligned with percentage in the Fall, 1966 entering class, a year for which I was able to obtain data (Heist et al., 1967). Also aligned with the Heist survey, about half of my participants were from a large town or suburban area.

Reasons for Attending Shimer College

I asked the participants why they chose to attend Shimer College. The responses to this question differed based on admission status. The early entrants primarily were interested in escaping their previous environment, and the traditional age entrants found Shimer's environment attractive. While the reasons stated were dominant within each group, there was some cross-over between them.

Push–Pull. Push–Pull is a theme name I developed for how my participants chose to attend Shimer College. The participants, especially those who began as early entrants, chose to attend Shimer primarily because they perceived Shimer as an escape from uncomfortable and unchallenging situations at home or school. However, they were also interested in Shimer’s program. Thus, they were at Shimer to push away from their previous lives while being pulled by an attraction to their perception of the Shimer environment.

Six of the participants were early entrants, students who entered Shimer College before graduating from high school. For them, Shimer’s early entrant program was a path to expedite their exit from a boring or unhappy high school or family life. Their feelings as expressed in the interviews echoed comments quoted in a report on early entrant programs sponsored by the Ford Foundation. In that report, the early entrants, like those in my participant pool, “said that early admission to college had ‘rescued’ them from an unchallenging high school experience” (Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1957, p. 63).

Many of the traditional-aged students, those who had graduated from high school before entering Shimer, were attracted by Shimer’s program as it was described in their publicity material or after campus visits. Others, like Riley, typified the Push–Pull theme. Riley saw Shimer as the antithesis of his high school, “where they tell you basically, what to think,” while also saying that he knew that he wanted to attend Shimer after reading their brochure. Thus, he wanted to push away from high school and was pulled by Shimer’s program.

Other comments by the participants about their attraction to Shimer's program were consistent with some research cited in my literature review. Paulsen suggested that academic programs and quality were critical elements in prospective students' choice of a college (1990). The participants appreciated Shimer's intellectual atmosphere, predicted by Feldman and Newcomb, who thought that the colleges with the most intellectual success tended to enroll students with that interest (1970). Most of the participants in my study described Shimer as the only college they wanted to attend, with only a few indicating that they had chosen among multiple schools. That so many of my participants were interested only in Shimer aligned with the results of the 1966 survey, which showed that for almost half of the entering students, Shimer was their only or first choice (Heist et al., 1967).

Most of the participant discussions about why they chose Shimer aligned with what I found in the literature. The participants clearly remembered that they were attracted to an intellectual atmosphere with a challenging and somewhat unique curriculum, a combination of self-selection and deliberate recruitment suggested by the literature (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970; Heist et al., 1967). The early-entrants and some other participants were also seeking to leave uncomfortable environments, demonstrating the Push-Pull concept as certainly typifying the reasons for my participants to have chosen to attend Shimer College. This theme helped answer my first research question as its primary effect was on the participants while attending Shimer.

Environment

According to Astin, the environment encompassed the programs and experiences to which the students were exposed. Although his definition did not explicitly mention the physical environment, I chose to include that aspect in my use of environment as part of the framework. The discussions of the environment led to three categories: physical environment, curriculum, and academics beyond the curriculum. Those three categories led to five themes.

Physical Environment

The discussion of the physical environment covered several subtopics, including Shimer's location, the campus layout, and the size of the college. The location had multiple aspects: its distance from large metropolitan areas coupled with minimal transportation options, its location in a small Midwestern town, and its location within the town relative to the town's shopping area. The campus itself was fairly compact, with all but two buildings around a central quad. One dormitory and the theater, both built in the mid- to late-1960s, were about a block away from the rest of the campus.

Ideal Vision. As I read the sections of the transcripts of the interviews regarding Shimer's physical environment, the phrases, "perfect," "ideal," and "couldn't have been a better place" kept appearing. When discussing Shimer's location, many of the participants appreciated the value of being somewhat isolated in a small town while attending college. They acknowledged that attending college in a larger city would offer many opportunities to be distracted from their studies. They also recognized that the effective isolation forced the students and faculty into a more tightly knit community than

might have happened in a less isolated or larger community. The insight regarding the effect of geographic isolation aligns with findings that students attending a residential college in a rural environment would likely complain about being bored, but also then they would “create a whole, meaningful life as full-time students” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 142). My participants had some complaints about the isolation, but also recognized the value of their isolation as it forced them to spend more time with one another.

Gumprecht claims that the idea of a college town is mostly an American concept and occurred because some college founders thought that a “quiet, rural setting, away from the evils of life, was the only proper environment for learning” (2003, p. 56). John, when he said that the “physical environment in the small town nearby” was important to him, gives credence to Gumprecht’s claim. The theme, Ideal Vision, comes directly from Larry’s interview, in which he discussed Shimer’s location in a small town.

Kuh’s research supports this concept of an attachment to the campus, in which the campus becomes part of the student’s identity (2005). I have heard similar statements in personal conversations with Shimer alumni not related to this research in which they said they still feel something special when they visit the Mount Carroll campus. The participants also liked the small size of the campus and how easily and quickly they could move between campus buildings. Interestingly, there is not much in the literature about the physical attributes of a college with the exception of literature on college architecture that discusses designing spaces to facilitate active learning or student collaboration.

College size was probably the topic that almost all of my participants agreed was a major factor when they were discussing the physical environment. The small size of the student body was the focus of most of the interviews, reflecting material in the literature. The participants described their ability to interact with their teachers, a linkage described by several researchers as desirable for effective student learning (Astin, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1970; Pascarella et al., 2005). Feldman and Newcomb also found that attending a small residential four-year college had a greater impact on students than attending a larger school (1970). Astin also noted that students at small colleges were more aggressive in classrooms than students at larger colleges, something my participants noted in their discussions (1977).

My participants agreed that the combination of Shimer's location, its campus, and its size contributed to make Shimer College an "ideal vision" for a college. Most of what I heard in the interviews was unsurprising and confirmed what I had found in the literature. The major exception was the appreciation by the students for being in a small town isolated from the distractions of larger city life. As someone who had attended Shimer, I was not surprised by the reaction of my participants. However, other than the brief comment by Strange and Benning (2001), I had not seen any other mention of the influences of college location and campus size in the literature. This theme affected my participants primarily while at Shimer and provided another answer to my first research question.

Curriculum. All of the participants had something to say about the curriculum, which included discussions of the rigid academic program, heavy reading and writing

loads, small class discussions, and comprehensive examinations. After reviewing the comments, I identified two themes. First, the participants credited the program less with teaching them specific content and more with preparing them for a life of constant changes. The other theme was tied to the integrative nature of Shimer's program, in which multiple courses were linked in the comprehensive examinations.

Learning How to Learn. Pete commented that "Shimer students were given ... a set of tools" instead of a manual, and I think that is the most appropriate metaphor for how the Shimer program helped its students learn to learn. Instead of being taught rote facts and instructions, such as one might find in the instructions for a microwave, Shimer students were given a universal set of tools that would help them solve whatever problems they faced in the future. This concept of learning universally applicable skills aligns with Astin's belief that a college education should not provide job-specific training but teach students how to adapt to the changing world around them (Astin et al., 1984). Astin reported that the ability to adapt to change relied on learning how to think critically, to synthesize new information, and to communicate effectively in all modalities (1984).

According to Gaff (1983), a college program should teach its students the skills that will be retained and will be needed for lifelong learning. Bok stated that an undergraduate education should help its students learn to learn for themselves (1974). The participants in this study perceived that Shimer's program succeeded in that goal when they discussed their flexibility and success in the workplace. Shimer's program seemed to succeed at what Duderstadt identified as the purpose of a doctoral education:

to “learn how to learn at a very sophisticated level ... that provides training for a later role as an advanced generalist” (2000, p. 93).

According to my participants, Shimer’s program succeeded in producing graduates who had learned how to learn, a skill that many researchers posit as being critical for success after college, especially in a world of constant changes. The participants recognized the value of knowing how to learn as they applied it to work in fields that may not have existed while they were in college. Thus, the theme of “learning how to learn” is one of the more important themes that emerged in this research because the theme reflected Shimer’s success at developing that skill and the participants’ recognition of its value. This theme affected the students not only while in school, as it helped them succeed in their upper level courses but was also credited by the participants with helping them in graduate school and as they moved to new career paths. Thus, this theme addressed both of my research questions.

Interconnectedness. Barker said that graduates in a specific subject do not have a broad enough understanding of how their field integrates with other fields and the graduates are not able to connect what they know to relevant information in other fields (2000). Based on my participants’ responses, not only did Shimer’s program overcome that problem, but former students and graduates also understood the importance of being able to see the big picture. The importance of integration among Shimer’s core disciplines was so critical to Shimer’s program that Shimer incorporated integration in their comprehensive examinations. Those comprehensive examinations also helped “engage students more fully in the process of how to think” (Braxton & Nordvall, 1985,

p. 550). More selective colleges, a category that included Shimer, used examinations that required higher levels of understanding and a greater degree of synthesis than those given at less selective colleges (Braxton & Nordvall, 1985). Examinations at less selective colleges relied on recall while those at more selective institutions required analysis and synthesis (Braxton & Nordvall, 1985). Shimer used more complex questions that connected multiple courses and disciplines in its comprehensive examinations. An example of this complexity and integration was evident in the description of a question in a comprehensive examination that asked the students to link a famous piece of art with an unrelated book and to write a speech on the subject, requiring the students also to write in a different structure than a normal essay.

Chickering visited the Shimer campus in the 1960s for a study on college and student characteristics and noted that Shimer's curricular goals included the development of a "comprehensive background of basic information" in its students (1966, p. 3). This integration within the college environment resulted in increases in learning and intellectual development (Pike et al., 2003). One of the goals of a liberal education is to encourage its students "to make connections and see relationships" (Mattfield, 1974, p. 284), a goal shared at Shimer. While the Shimer program was based on the importance of knowledge spanning a wide range instead of a narrow focus, the focus on a broad knowledge base did not diminish the depths of learning that occurred there (Jencks & Riesman, 1966).

Interconnectedness of the various subjects at Shimer was built into its curriculum as part of Shimer's adoption of the Great Books model. The college, its students, and its

alumni recognized the importance of connecting various disciplines. My study participants credited the integration of the disciplines with helping them to learn while they were students and with helping them succeed in their subsequent careers. This theme helped answer both of my research questions, given its immediate and long-term effects.

Academics Beyond the Curriculum. Attending a residential college like Shimer provides the students with more opportunities to be involved on campus with activities, faculty, and other students (Astin, 1984). My participants identified multiple ways in which they benefitted from attending a small residential college, and those discussions led to two themes. One theme focused on the relationships they formed with faculty and with other students while in school and how those relationships affected them. The other theme addressed how being in a small residential community helped them in their learning.

Relationships. Developing relationships with college faculty and peers creates a trusting community in which its members feel free to question and share information with others (Taylor, 2007). Small liberal arts colleges have a major positive impact derived from the development of these relationships (Pascarella et al., 2005). The importance of these relationships emerged in the interviews with the participants, some of whom remain in contact with their peers or teachers today. The Shimer faculty, staff, and students also developed a very strong sense of community as compared with other schools, and certain behaviors are considered non-Shimerian (Chickering, 1966). This observation supports the comment in one interview about not having to explain jokes to other Shimer people.

Feldman and Newcomb say that the closer contact between students and faculty at small residential colleges leads to greater impact of the educational program and to students being more likely to understand course goals when working with their teachers (1970). Non-classroom interactions between students and faculty also lead to greater cognitive development in analytical and critical thinking skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Shimer was described as one of the few colleges where faculty are a critical part of undergraduate development and whose peer-like interactions with students increase the intellectual level of discourse among the students (Jencks & Riesman, 1966).

Student–student relationships were also important among my study participants as they described being among other students with similar thought processes and intellectual interests. The participants enjoyed meeting and interacting with their fellow students. They credited out-of-class discussions with their fellow students as helping them more than some classroom discussions, although the literature questions that assertion and the students’ ability to properly evaluate that impact (Bowman & Seifert, 2011).

While I found several references in the literature about student–faculty relationships, most of the literature on student–student relationships is focused on community building and peer influence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Most of my participants, when discussing relationships with other students, talked about the long-lasting friendships they formed. These friendships were typically those formed because the participants, as students, were living in the same dormitories and engaging in social activities in the lounges.

A few also discussed communities when commenting on how the physical isolation of the campus furthered the development of a community of scholars. The community of scholars effect facilitated the learning that took place outside of the classroom, as discussed in the next section. Some of the research on small schools mentions that students in small schools are more likely than those in larger schools to be involved with student organizations (R. G. Barker, 1964). While I know from personal experience that Shimer had a student newspaper, student literary magazine, a theatre group, and a campus radio station, the only mention of club activities was by two participants from the earliest range of attendance years of my participants. Those students discussed some political activities. Other than those two students, none of the participants mentioned club activities in the interviews. This would indicate that the club activities were not remembered as being meaningful. The only other student group activity mentioned was the basketball team with its record-setting number of losses.

The theme of relationships, encompassing both student–faculty and student–student interactions, was a popular topic among my participants. They enjoyed having random discussions on abstruse topics in the campus lounges, dormitories, and Poffy’s. The theme of relationships, with its described effect not only on the participants while students but during their subsequent lives, helped answer both of my research questions.

Learning Outside the Classroom. In an ideal world, learning extends beyond the classroom, reinforcing and enhancing the more formal pedagogical experiences. Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, said:

The Great Books curriculum ensures that all undergraduates will have studied the same substantial list of readings and grappled with the same set of fundamental questions ... by engaging students in active argument about the texts. Stimulated by these encounters and armed with a common set of readings, students will naturally carry their discussions beyond the classroom into their dining halls and dormitory rooms. ... Better yet, such study may create a common core of learning within an increasingly diverse student body and thus provide a counterweight to the divisive tendencies of race, religion, and class. (2006, p. 263)

The combination of Shimer's use of the Great Books program and that it was a small residential college enhanced the opportunities for the type of learning that Bok described. The Great Books program, unlike the general education or distribution requirements in other colleges, meant that all students read the same books and participated in similar discussions in the classroom (Bok, 2006). Those classroom discussions were often engaging, if not active arguments, and led to further discussions outside the classroom, as reported by my participants. An example of this carryover was the dining hall argument over Spinoza described in chapter 4. Those discussions occurred anywhere students gathered, and the opportunities for those conversations were enhanced by Shimer's small size.

More common educational experiences coupled with the minimal distances on campus between the classrooms, lounges, and dormitories led to less psychological separation, fostering more spillover from the classroom (Feldman & Newcomb, 1970). Mark Benney, who taught at Shimer in the early 1960s, said that the students' "interests,

their unorthodoxy, created a steady hum of intellectuality in the dining room and dorms” (Degras, 1966, p. 333).

The theme of learning outside the classroom reinforces the literature that proposed that small residential colleges using a Great Books program were likely to have increased learning outside the classroom (Bok, 2006; Feldman & Newcomb, 1970). This theme affected the participants not only as students, but also later in life by demonstrating that they can learn without being in a formal learning environment. As such, this theme answered both of my research questions.

Chickering’s Seven Aspects of a College Environment. Arthur Chickering, a noted researcher in higher education, identified seven aspects of a college environment he thought critical for the college. In addition to the broad-based questions in my interviews, I asked the participants how they thought Shimer performed on those aspects (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). I used the specific questions about the named seven aspects as a way to focus some participant responses on criteria that had deemed important in earlier studies on college effects. Some of the questions about Chickering’s aspects mirrored topics discussed in the earlier parts of my interviews, while others were addressed only in response to my questions about the seven aspects. The resultant responses aligned with and informed the themes identified in my study.

Clear and Consistent Institutional Objectives. This question was not addressed in the open-ended sections of my interviews and drew mixed responses from the participants. Irene said that she thought there were clear objectives “because it was a clear model of education and was always front and center.” Jack thought there were

objectives, but they weren't important and "nobody paid any attention to it." Olivia said that she didn't "ever remember it being discussed." while she was at Shimer. Most seemed to agree that the college followed some form of institutional objectives, but several seemed unaware that any were clearly defined. No consistent theme emerged from the discussion of institutional objectives.

Institutional Size (Affects Institutional Impact). College size was an important topic in the open-ended part of the interviews. Because the participants felt this was previously discussed in depth, their responses to this specific question referred to their earlier discussions on the topic. With one exception, all of the participants agreed that Shimer's small size was critical to their experience. They relished the small classes and said that they knew almost all of their fellow students.

Ian expressed a concern about the library:

The one case where size makes a difference that is a problem for a school like Shimer, is the library. The accreditation things, they are always interested in, they are always looking at size of the library, and they look at the size of it, they do not look at the quality of it, they just look at the size.

Carol, who was at Shimer after the enrollment had plummeted, liked "the size of the campus," but acknowledged "there were times I maybe wished there were more people." The aspect of institutional size was captured in the Ideal Vision theme.

Student-Faculty Relationships. This topic was discussed in the open-ended discussions as an aspect considered important. The participants all had developed close relationships with their teachers, going to their houses or talking with them regularly

outside of formal class times. Student–faculty relationships emerged as part of the relationships theme in my research.

Curriculum. Curricular design was discussed in detail in the earlier part of the interviews. The participants all agreed on the structure and value of Shimer’s curriculum, claiming that it was central to the Shimer experience. Al said that he “thought it was very structured, very well-articulated.” One participant used it as a basis for an honors college program that he developed during his career in higher education.

All appreciated the structure that forced them to find their own sources of information and to synthesize what they had learned in their assignments. They thought the sequence of courses was very well thought out and fostered greater learning because of its integrative model. I identified the significance of Shimer’s curriculum design as an important theme in my research.

Teaching. This topic did not arise during the open-ended discussion and drew mixed responses. A few students said that the more experienced faculty were very good while the younger faculty who came in towards the end of Shimer’s time in Mount Carroll were not as effective. A few commented on the depth and breadth of knowledge of some of the faculty, frequently citing a language teacher who knew dozens of languages.

Ian said, “Shimer did have some very, very good teachers who experienced ... had been teaching for a long time.” He also recalled that some teachers came to Shimer from the University of Chicago because they didn’t have the advanced degrees needed in Chicago but were excellent instructors. According to Larry:

The teaching was really pretty good. I think generally speaking, the people that I had did well within the format which was to ask questions. Which was to moderate the discussion, which was to bring in some outside thoughts when those thoughts weren't getting expressed by the students who were in the class.

Olivia remembered having "some really horrible teachers and ... some really good teachers." Quincy thought the teaching was uneven but "some teachers were there ... because they really profoundly believed in the mission of the college" and some "had unexpected depths" outside their topic that made them more interesting. Teaching did not emerge as an important aspect during the interviews with the participants.

Friendships and Student Communities. Friendships with other students came up in almost all of my discussions during the open-ended discussions. The participants described the various friendships they formed and groups they joined. The groups were varied, from the expected theater or intramural sports groups to the political. Irene described nervous conversations in the grill during the Cuban Missile Crisis, with students asking "Are we all going to die in the next 24 hours? Are they going to bomb Chicago, and what would that ... there was tremendous anxiety." One group organized a trip to Chicago to hand out brochures advocating "fair play for Cuba." Irene said that participation in that or a subsequent peace march to Chicago were experiences "that make for enduring feelings of connection."

Friendships were described as being very close because of the community size and the way the rigid curriculum gave students a lot in common. Quincy described how long-lasting the relationships were when he talked about getting together with his former

roommate years later for what turned out to be an all-night wine-fed discussion, at the end of which he said to his former roommate, “do you realize we just had the same conversation that we had our first night together as roommates at Shimer?” The concept of friendships and communities emerged as part of the relationships theme during my research.

Student Development Programs and Services. This topic did not arise organically during the interviews. Participants found Shimer lacking in student development programs and services. A few commented on the existence of someone in a counselor role but all felt that person was ineffectual and failed to connect to students who were in need. Al said that a few teachers would counsel students, but that “there were big gaps because there were a few examples of students with mental illness.” Irene concurred:

I think that was a hole in what Shimer had. Because I don’t think there was a structure, or an attention to ... a structure for dealing with, or an attention to what to do with ... all of these, especially early entering kids, coming in at all these levels of maturity and confusion.

Quincy described a conversation on his graduation day with the chaplain about “how rough things had been” during which the chaplain told him that “we did think you were going through quite a bit there.” Even decades later, Quincy was still upset about the lack of emotional support on campus, something a few of the participants noted. The concept of student development services was not mentioned in the open-ended discussions and surfaced only in response to my question when reviewing Chickering’s seven aspects.

Summary. The themes identified in the environment offered some interesting insights into what aspects of the Shimer experience affected the participants primarily while they were students, with some themes having carryover effects in their current lives. Applying Chickering's seven aspects as a framework for the interviews and analysis provides a second check on my choice of categories for the themes. It is interesting that several participants thought that Shimer's isolated location was an important aspect of their time at Shimer, but Chickering did not include that variable as a defining aspect of the college environment.

Outcomes

Astin refers to Outcomes in his model as the characteristics of the students after being exposed to the environment. As mine is a study of long-term effects, the period to which the outcomes could apply might exceed 50 years. Outcomes has only one category, post-Shimer outcomes, which in turn has two themes.

Post-Shimer Outcomes

My discussions with the participants about their lives after Shimer covered a wide gamut of topics. We talked about the colleges they attended after leaving Shimer and how the schools compared. With some, we discussed more personal things such as their marriage to their Shimer partner and how they supported each other through their subsequent educational and work endeavors. As with other topics, the participants were quite open and forthcoming about their experiences.

The post-Shimer outcomes category led to two themes: Self-Confidence and Skill Set Growth. Participants reported that their self-confidence increased tremendously as a

result of their Shimer experiences. The theme of skill set growth is derived from the discussions on how they overcame challenges in graduate school or in their careers.

Self-Confidence. Many of the students expressed a surprising amount of self-confidence during our discussions. They discussed their successes in graduate school as well as in their careers. Most seemed to feel that their Shimer education, with its heavy reading and writing requirements coupled with the need to articulate and defend opinions extemporaneously in class had prepared them to tackle almost anything they chose. Some of the participants came across as being extremely self-assured about their perceptions of their own abilities.

This increased level of self-confidence was not something I had originally expected when starting this research. However, a more recent review of the literature on that specific topic found work that predicted some increase, although not to the levels of self-assuredness perceived in this study. Most of the work on the topic focused on competence and the resulting self-confidence. Astin said that college attendance produced an increased sense of competence and self-worth as well as an increased level of intellectual self-confidence (1977). Roth suggested that education expanded horizons by developing the ability to see new possibilities and to attempt to cross boundaries others might see as obstacles (2014). Baxter-Magolda's research included comments from some of her participants in which they expressed feelings similar to those I heard in my interviews. One of her participants talked about feeling free to express a contrary opinion, something I sensed during my interviews.

The amount of self-confidence that came across in the interviews was one of the surprises in my research. While I was aware of the accomplishments of some of the participants and other Shimer alumni, I did not expect to hear them talk about taking whatever life threw at them and using it to their advantage. The participants' self-confidence helped them complete their last years at Shimer with its challenging requirements or at other colleges and then to take on challenges in the workplace. The participants felt comfortable taking on responsibilities for which they had no formal training because of the knowledge acquisition skills developed at Shimer. This theme answered both of my research questions because of its effect on the participants both at Shimer and during their later lives.

Skill Set Growth. This theme developed out of same base as the self-confidence theme, Shimer alumni competence. Their competence led to a tackle-anything attitude. The skills developed through their Shimer education enabled them to learn about subjects in fields new to them. They demonstrated their competencies as 12 of them earned graduate degrees and almost all had multiple careers during their work lives.

Graduate school attendance was almost expected for Shimer alumni. The 1966 survey of entering students showed that over two-thirds had plans to earn graduate degrees during their lifetimes (Heist et al., 1967). Jencks and Reisman also claimed that Shimer students were better prepared for graduate work in most fields than graduates of more specialized programs.

The majority of my participants worked at multiple jobs in disparate fields during their work lives, and almost all of them said that Shimer did not prepare them for the

specific jobs they held. Instead, they credited Shimer's program with helping them develop the skills they needed as they faced workplace challenges. Participant comfort with facing life's varied challenges is aligned with earlier research on liberal education, which prepares students for all of life instead of having a practical focus (Gaff, 1983). Mattfield said that a liberal education is to train people to use sound judgment when making decisions, an attitude demonstrated by Jack's story about his meeting with a group of his peers and his employer.

Bowen also supports the idea of college helping students move into new fields when he described college as providing "the skills and perspectives that enable students in later life to learn or relearn detailed knowledge in a variety of fields as occasion demands and to fit this knowledge into a framework of larger principles and concepts" (Bowen, 1977, p. 89). College graduates with degrees in liberal arts, such as those from Shimer, are also more likely to have occupations spanning more fields than those with career-oriented majors (Choy & Bradburn, 2008).

Overall, most of the participants demonstrated a great deal of flexibility in their ability to move to and adapt to new jobs, some of which may not have existed when they graduated from Shimer. They credit their flexibility to the Shimer program, with its interconnected curriculum that taught students not only how to learn to learn, but to learn in multiple disciplines. This theme, dependent on the previous themes, had its greatest effect on my participants after they left Shimer, answering my second research question.

Conclusions

Most of the results aligned with the literature review and helped to answer my research questions about the immediate and long-term effects of their Shimer experiences. None of the participants expressed discomfort with their life trajectories. Many enjoyed working in multiple fields, some of which were unknown when they attended Shimer. They all enjoyed the time they spent at Shimer and credited Shimer's program with affecting their lives positively.

The first research question asked what aspects of the participants' time at Shimer had an immediate effect on them. Their choice to attend Shimer certainly had an immediate effect on them. The Push–Pull theme showed that the participants chose to attend Shimer because the program attracted them. Some, mostly the early entrants, had the additional incentive of wanting to escape their previous environments. A few of the participants left Shimer for various reasons before graduating, but even those credit what they learned at Shimer with helping them through their subsequent lives. All had positive memories of their Shimer experiences.

Shimer's physical environment also had an immediate impact on the participants and was seen as an ideal vision by the participants. Its isolation in a rural town forced the students to interact more with one another than might have occurred at a school in a larger city. The campus layout and college size were also seen as helping the students engage with each other more than might happen at a larger college.

Shimer's curriculum had an immediate effect in that its structure developed skills that helped the participants address the increasing complexity of their courses. The theme

of learning how to learn prepared them for the more difficult courses in their later years. The interconnectedness of the curriculum prepared them for the integrating comprehensive examinations.

The participants also learned from and put to immediate use their relationships with the faculty and with other students. Their interactions with faculty were, for many, their first peer relationships with adults, skills they would need as they moved into the workplace. Their interactions with other students, especially in the demanding discussion classes, taught them to present and defend effectively their own opinions while respecting those of their peers.

Their ability to succeed in the Shimer program was increased as they learned that learning is not limited to what was discussed in the classroom and that debates are not limited by the ringing of the class bell. The participants especially recognized the value of continuing their discussions into the dining hall or the local bar. Through these debates and the comprehensive examinations, they learned that not every question has one right answer.

The second research question asked what aspects of the Shimer experience affected the participants throughout their lives. My analysis of Shimer's curriculum produced two themes that the participants credited with affecting their lives. The curriculum was designed to help them learn how to learn so they were prepared not only for the more challenging upper-level courses but also to adapt to the changing world they would be entering. The program's interconnectedness helped the participants think about

their courses and subsequent life challenges holistically. They learned that those problems did not exist in isolation.

After leaving Shimer, the participants attended graduate school or entered the workforce with a very powerful toolbox of skills derived from their Shimer education. The competencies in analysis and critical thinking skills gave them the confidence to tackle challenges for which they were not formally prepared. Their demonstrated success at overcoming those challenges gave them the self-confidence to move into areas that were seen by their peers as being beyond their purview.

Among examples of the ways in which the participants demonstrated the success of the Shimer program at preparing them for the unexpected was Al, who, after doing photography and driving a school bus, built an activities therapy program at a residential treatment center. He then returned to school, earned a doctorate in a humanities field, and became a university professor. While in that position, he was asked to help develop an honors program, which he designed using the Shimer curriculum as a model. During the interviews he said that he was not “officially” prepared for any of the positions he held.

After graduating from Shimer, Jack avoided the draft by becoming a teacher. After meeting his alternative service requirement, he went to work for a large national corporation at which he helped computerize many projects. He moved on to positions with five other large corporations, helping to build a quality control system at the first and eventually becoming a vice president for his later employers. Joseph moved from a graduate program in business to a position in engineering with a multi-national corporation, where he stayed for about 5 years before deciding that human resources was

more interesting. After developing his skills in that field, he became tired of being transferred to new locations and left to start his own company in the human relations field, eventually selling and starting another at least twice.

Zoe is another example of Shimer alumni developing the skills needed to fit a job in which she was interested. While working on a master's degree, she bought a computer and learned how to program, using those skills to be hired as a programming analyst while in school. From that she moved to working on a project to network the library systems, becoming interested enough in libraries to change to a degree in library sciences, which led to her becoming a librarian.

These examples show that the Shimer program prepared its graduates to look for and accept new challenges, typically without having been trained in the new field. They felt confident enough in their ability to acquire and use the necessary skills to take a chance on succeeding in those new fields. They also had the skills to convince the new employers to give them that chance.

Three areas produced results that I had not anticipated. The first was the joy felt by the entering students upon being surrounded by other students with similar intellectual interests. While the 1966 survey discussed the similarities among the entering students, I had not expected that to arouse the happiness reported by the participants. A second surprise was the number of participants who liked Shimer's isolated location. The possible preference for an isolated college campus was barely mentioned in the literature although the benefits make sense. The last of the three was the increased self-confidence expressed by the students. While the literature discusses the increase in self-confidence

among college graduates as a result of the competencies developed in their education, it did not suggest the cockiness that I sensed in the interviews.

Overall, the participant interviews demonstrated the value of the type of education offered by Shimer College while they were students. I learned what aspects of the program they perceived as having affected them while they were students and through their later lives. I also had an unexpected answer to my original question when I started this project: how did so many graduates of a Great Books program, with no access to technology or even modern labs, wind up in technology-oriented careers? The answer lies in the self-confidence and the underlying roots of that self-confidence: they learned how to learn about new fields and were self-confident enough not to accept “no” in response to their attempts to move into those fields.

Implications

The Shimer program was extremely effective for this group of participants. My research showed that there were specific aspects of the program that my participants credited with affecting them as students and as adults. Some of those aspects might be replicated at other higher education institutions.

Shimer’s small size was a major factor in the success of its program. Larger colleges and universities could establish smaller self-contained school communities within the college or university with restricted enrollments. Some universities have established honors program both within their separate subject-oriented colleges and as separate entities. Class sizes could be reduced through the use of “break-out” discussion

sessions to maintain affordable student–faculty ratios. Upper level or graduate students interested in careers in education could serve as facilitators for those sessions.

Larger colleges and universities could implement ways to enhance relationships, both among the students and between students and faculty. The smaller school-within-a-school could have its own required residence hall and have the school’s faculty assigned to work with the students to foster more out-of-class engagement. The faculty and upper level students would act as “seeds” for building closer relationships. They could host various activities to foster that engagement. For this to be effective, the faculty and upper-level students interacting in the residence hall should be the same people involved in teaching and facilitating classes, so the students can build those relationships. None of the preceding suggestions would be easy or inexpensive to implement, but if they succeed even partially, the students would benefit.

Shimer’s integrated curriculum was another aspect popular among the participants that could be replicated on a small scale in larger colleges. The general education requirements at most schools are a smorgasbord with no linkage among the courses. Colleges could establish general education “tracks” with courses linked not only within the track but also to the students’ majors, creating an opportunity to develop courses that help the students see the interconnectedness among the subjects they are studying. Colleges could also introduce interdisciplinary courses that link subjects together. A course in an engineering program could link technological changes to sociopolitical changes. A course in art history could link to topics that would address links between art and religion or how people perceived others.

Existing major programs could offer minors that would enhance the prospects for career advancement among graduates. While many colleges offer business minors, courses in those programs could specialize in challenges unique to those areas. Among possible topics could be the challenges faced by highly competent technical workers when their promotion forces them to delegate tasks in which they consider themselves experts. Other courses could cover the different types of communication required at higher organization levels.

Braxton and Nordvall discussed the use of examinations requiring higher order thinking as being common at more selective institutions (1985). As discussed earlier, the examinations at Shimer College, especially the comprehensive examinations, are examples of the higher-order thinking discussed. Shimer's curriculum aligns very well with Bloom's taxonomy, either in its original form or in Krathwohl's later revision of the cognitive process dimension. Shimer's course sequence, leading to its final integrative course and comprehensive examination, has the same goals as in the taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). Colleges might consider using the Shimer program as an effective and successful model for incorporating Bloom's taxonomy into their programs.

The archived Shimer course documents included syllabi, tests, paper assignments, and other course material (Shimer College, n.d.-a). Some of the documents in the collection contained extremely detailed descriptions of the course goals and how the material for that course linked to other courses in the subject sequence. The level of detail in this material implies a high level of intentionality in Shimer's curriculum and course design and implementation. Shimer's inclusion of its curriculum map (Appendix D) in

the catalog is another example of the intentionality of the curriculum. Although my participants did not initiate or express an appreciation for Chickering's clear and consistent institutional objectives (1993), the participants acknowledged the intentionality. Colleges might consider developing similar material when implementing new program models.

Institutional board members (and politicians when public universities are engaged) seem focused on immediate job prospects and income for their graduates. Although none of my participants mentioned income levels during our interviews, neither did any of them voice any complaints about their lives after attending Shimer. All of the participants seem to have held positions with high levels of responsibility. While some changed fields of employment a few times and others followed more traditional paths through organizational hierarchies, they all seemed comfortable with those paths. Not one mentioned any problems finding jobs or staying employed. Of greater importance is that all of the participants credited the Shimer program, with its rigor, integration, and focus on learning how to learn in new disciplines, with having helped them through their working lives. While many were not immediately employed at the high-income levels that some of today's college graduates or their parents expect, all of the participants eventually moved to responsible higher-level positions.

Implementing some or all of these suggestions is only part of the challenge faced by today's higher education institutions in changing their programs. The other challenge is recruiting students to those new programs. Shimer College in the early 1960s was effective at increasing enrollments and more modern variations of some of the concepts

they used might be effective today. Many of my participants commented on the articles in popular magazines as having made them aware of Shimer's program and leading them to apply. Other participants remembered the brochure in Appendix J as having drawn them to research more about Shimer. That brochure stood out not only because of its tone, designed to appeal to high-school-age students, but because it built on something unique about Shimer: its size. Colleges and universities should find something unique about their school or program and use that in their marketing to attract attention.

Another outreach concept used by Shimer and still applicable today was their identification of their target demographic: students who did not fit in a traditional school setting. Shimer managed to reach those prospective students through mailings targeting students with high scores. Shimer also reached out to high school guidance counselors, who were likely to be asked for suggestions for colleges by students and parents.

Shimer's marketing material highlighted its uniqueness and strengths, such as its small size and Great Books program, to appeal to its desired student demographic. Colleges and universities should use their own established identities similarly.

Thoughts for Future Research

While I was working on this project, additional questions came to mind about topics beyond the scope of this paper. I made notes on those questions as ideas that I could pursue later. The first is to build on this work by extending the participant pool to include Shimer alumni from its subsequent iterations. Shimer College operated in Waukegan, a northern Chicago suburb, after leaving Mount Carroll. That iteration started with about 50 students and eventually reached a student population in the low 100s,

acquiring additional buildings to meet its needs. In 2005, Shimer moved to the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology, where it occupied one floor in a campus building. Shimer closed as an independent institution in 2017 and moved to North Central College, in a west Chicago suburb, where it became the Shimer Great Books School. I think it would be interesting to conduct the identical study with people who attended Shimer at those three campuses to learn how the same program in vastly different environments affected its students.

It would be interesting to expand the study to other colleges. For example, St. John's College in Annapolis is about the same size as Shimer and uses a similar curriculum. However, St. John's has a more rigid program and is located in a metropolitan area. It would be interesting to learn how those differences affected students from the same period. Another possibility is to look at a more traditional liberal arts school like Cornell College in Iowa, with about twice the number of students as Shimer and in a town about twice the size of Mount Carroll but still somewhat isolated. Again, how did those changes affect student perceptions of their time there?

Another area for potential future research is the topic of self-selection among college applicants. The 1966 survey analysis alludes to some similarities among the Shimer entrants (Heist et al., 1967). It would be interesting to learn how much of the Shimer effects I identified are the result of the characteristics of the students who chose to attend Shimer.

Career goals among entering students could be linked to the question of self-selection and could be a possible area for future research. Very few of the participants

entered Shimer with a specific career goal, and it would be interesting to learn if Shimer's program attracted primarily students without specific career objectives. This question could be expanded to address a link between college choice and applicant career plans. Part of the research on career goals and achievements might also review the number and variety of the positions held by Shimer alumni. A researcher might want to try to determine if the tendency to transition to new fields was a result of the characteristics of the students when they entered Shimer or if the Shimer program led to that behavior.

Many Shimer students and about a third of my participants were early entrants. Some of my participants, both early entrants and those who entered after graduating from high school, said that they chose to attend Shimer because they did not feel comfortable or were not learning in their home environments. Researchers might want to explore the demographic and personal characteristics of those two groups, the early entrants and those who felt uncomfortable, and then try to learn how today's high school student populations who exhibit similar characteristics are selecting colleges.

The participants in this research attended Shimer in the 1960s and 1970s, a period that included the cold war with the Soviet Union and the war with Vietnam, with many political changes and assassinations. The subsequent period, during which the participants were in the workforce, saw many changes in technology and politics. It would be interesting to learn how those changes affected the participants or if Shimer's program affected how they coped with those changes.

College dormitories through the 1960s were mostly single sex with limited visitation by members of the opposite sex. Women's dormitories were also locked down

at night with the female residents required to be in their dormitory by a specific time, typically with later hours for older students or on weekends. These restrictions were reduced gradually at Shimer during the later 1960s and that change may have affected the socialization and opportunities for developing new relationships with other people. Prior to the change, the only places on campus for interaction between male and female students was in the campus public areas. It would be interesting to try to learn if and how the change to open dormitory visiting affected student relationships with faculty and with other students.

Looking back at the results and the interviews, I regret not having addressed other more personal aspects of the participants' lives in more detail without violating their privacy and anonymity. I would like to know how happy they felt about their lives and what changes they might wish for. Another regret was my inability to schedule group or in-person discussions. A group discussion might have allowed the participants to build on each other and lead to more detail in the discussions. As useful as technology intermediation is, I wonder how much the loss of personal contact affected the participants' discussion.

Summary

This chapter contains my analysis of the findings from chapter four and how they related to the existing literature on the effects of college on students. I discussed the eight themes that emerged and the importance of their short- and long-term effects on my participants. While my study focused on a small cohort of participants from a very small college with some unique attributes, I identified options for colleges today to implement

some of the factors that affected the participants the most. I also identified some options to expand and extend my research to clarify further what college aspects have the greatest effect on their students.

Appendix A

Time Magazine Article About Shimer

EDUCATION

COLLEGES

Unknown, Unsung & Unusual

Under the spring sun of the rolling farmlands around the northwestern Illinois town of Mount Carroll, tiny Shimer College wears a mask of nodding tranquillity. It might be some 19th century prairie academy trying to drive a little erudition into the neighboring pumpkin-heads. Instead, Shimer is one of eleven U.S. campuses that have an ideal "intellectual climate" in the opinion of Syracuse University Psychologist George G. Stern, writing in the current *Harvard Educational Review*.

"Shimer has fewer courses than any college going," says its president, F. Joseph Mullin, 56, and he means it as a boast. Largely unknown and unsung outside the Midwest, Shimer (rhymes with rhymers) aims to be not a training school of the professions but a "community of scholars." The Episcopal-related college has no departments, and teachers move through the school's three areas—humanities, social sciences and natural sciences—as easily as do the students. The chaplain, for example, teaches drama.

The 32-man faculty (13 of whom hold doctorates) is free of the race for rank, since Shimer has no professors or assistant professors as such. At the same time, Shimer's students are free of the fight for classroom attention. The faculty recently cut the class-size limit down from 25 to 19, despite the fact that this would give some teachers as many as nine classes a day. The reduction was voted through

without a plea for increased salary—in fact, no Shimer faculty member has asked for a raise since 1954, and two men who were offered raises this year declined so that the money could be put in the school's general fund.

Nine Days of Exams. One in every five of Shimer's 275 students is an early entrant, some coming on campus after completing only two years of high school. Many of the college's top students either flunked or dropped out of other schools, but in Shimer's stimulating atmosphere came back to intellectual life. Students take three courses a semester, are encouraged to integrate the subject matter of one as fully as possible with the others. Because it is small, integrated in subject matter and undepartmentalized, Shimer can give year-end comprehensive exams that thoroughly test the student's total knowledge. Each "comp" takes an entire day. The first set of comps covers logic, rhetoric and analysis; the second, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences; and the third, history, philosophy and foreign languages. Only in the fourth year can students begin specializing.

The system works: in the 1959 graduate-record tests of seniors conducted by the Educational Testing Service, Shimer ranked first of 222 colleges in the humanities and natural sciences, tied for first in social science. Says the University of Chicago's dean of admissions: "We're always glad to get a student from Shimer."

Closes in Bistros. For most of its 110-year history, Shimer was just another women's junior college going nowhere. For



a while it became a feeder school for the University of Chicago. Then, in 1949, it woke up to find itself with an \$80,000 debt and only 65 students. The next year, Shimer adopted the University of Chicago's general education plan, went co-educational for the first time since the Civil War. But it took more than that to get the college moving.

In 1954, Joe Mullin, a burly, bespectacled physiologist with a West Texas drawl, came from a professorship at the University of Chicago medical school to become president of Shimer. By virtue of having taught doctors, he had one driving conviction—that professional men by and large are too narrowly educated, and need a broad liberal schooling before going into graduate schools.

Since Shimer has no endowment, Mullin began to pass the hat, now raises as much as \$150,000 a year as compared with the \$5,000 typical of the early '50s. He has doubled faculty salaries (the average Shimer salary is now \$6,100), and doubled the faculty too—always with an eye for the man who would fit his concept of a community of scholars.

"Corny as it sounds," says Chairman of the Humanities John Hirschfield, "people here are treated as human beings. The most amazing things can happen to you."

Two years ago, a group of Hirschfield's students were weighing the pros and cons of a year of study abroad. They wanted to go, but hated to give up Hirschfield's courses in humanities and history. "They got to talking with me about it," says Mullin, "and I said, why not just send Hirschfield along?" He did, and a tenth of Shimer's student body got both Europe and its favorite teacher, who taught them mornings in Paris bistros. "And you know," Mullin adds, "they all did better on their comps than the rest of their classmates."

Mullin's thoughtfulness pays off in student seriousness. Said one Shimer boy last week: "You've got a responsibility to the instructor, the rest of the class and yourself. They expect something of you."

"Obscene & Indescent"

In one of the sharpest of the Nichols and May nightclub skits, Elaine May does a spoof on a Tennessee Williams heroine who is said to be guilty of "drink, prostitution and puttin' on airs." Last week at the University of Mississippi, a young painter and art teacher was charged with obscenity, indecency and puttin' on art shows.

To Painter G. Ray Kerciu, 30, assistant professor of art at Ole Miss, the sprawling painting he called *America the Beautiful* expressed all the raw violence and redneck inhumanity of last September's integration crisis at the university. Kerciu had watched the riots from his office window, and for two weeks afterward found himself unable to lay brush to canvas. But he wanted to express the drama of this turning point of state history. Normally a quiet, representational landscapist, Kerciu adopted the style of Manhattan Artists

SHIMER'S PRESIDENT MULLIN & STUDENTS
A community of scholars.

ARTHUR DIESEL

76

TIME, APRIL 19, 1963

"Unknown, Unsung & Unusual," (1963, April 19), *Time*, 81(16), 90.

Appendix B

Books Accumulated by Graduation from Shimer



Photo by Erik James Hervert, May, 2020. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix C

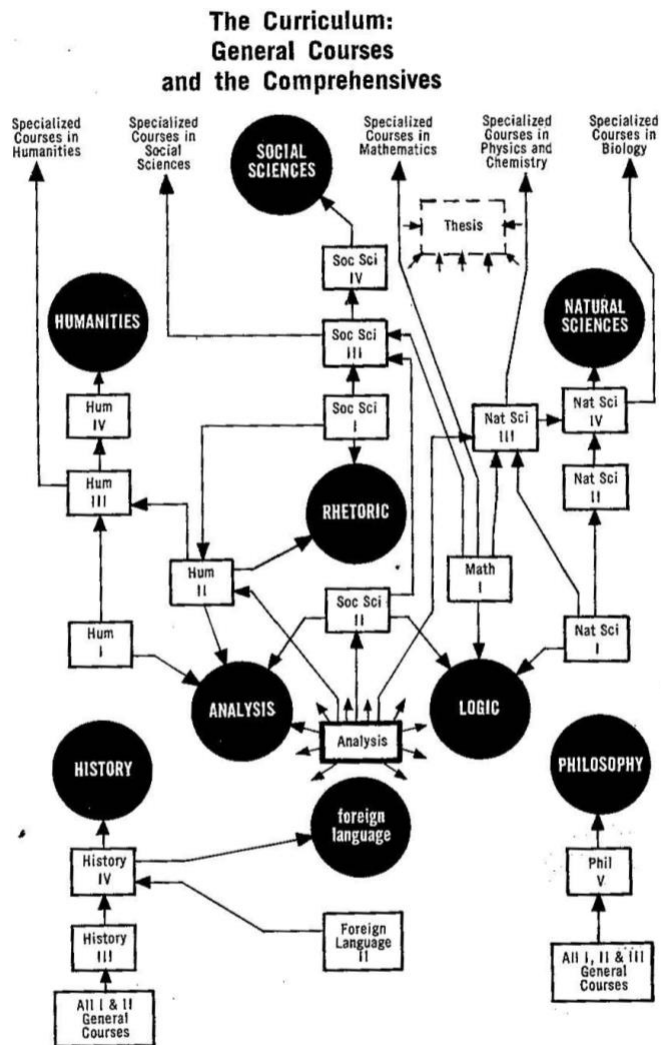
Poffy's Bar



Poffy's (n.d.), retrieved July 12, 2020, from <https://carroll.illinoisgenweb.org/history/poffys.htm>.

Appendix D

Shimer Catalog Curriculum Diagram



Appendix E

IRB Exemption Letter



Office of Research Development, Integrity, and Assurance

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445, Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: February 13, 2019

TO: Jeannie Brown Leonard, PhD
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [547699-3] Shimer College Effects on Student Life Outcomes

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: February 13, 2019

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be submitted to the IRB office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Bess Dieffenbach at 703-993-5593 or edieffen@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.

Please note that department or other approvals may also be required to conduct your research.

GMU IRB Standard Operating Procedures can be found here: <https://rdia.gmu.edu/topics-of-interest/human-or-animal-subjects/human-subjects/human-subjects-sops/>

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.

Appendix F

Interview Questions

Can you name three songs that you associate with your time at Shimer? What is their significance?

What about three books you read while at Shimer – either for class or on your own? What was their significance?

How did you wind up at Shimer?

How did you hear about it?

What other schools did you consider?

Was Shimer the only school you would have attended?

Did you visit Shimer or the others?

What was your reason for choosing Shimer?

If you didn't complete your education at Shimer, what led to that decision?

What were your thoughts during your first week at Shimer?

Were they doing orientation week with mostly new students and placement tests?

How did that affect your experience?

How did the Shimer educational program align with your expectations for college?

Issues? Can you describe some examples of the academic experience that resonated with you then? And now? Good things? Did you feel any frustration about nothing being directly related to preparing you for a job?

What about the non-academic experiences? Can you describe some examples of non-academic interactions that you thought were critical events at the time? How about from today's perspective?

Did you work during the school year, either on campus or in town? If so, how did that affect your experience at Shimer?

What about your Shimer experience was most meaningful to you?

What was your first job after leaving? How did you wind up in that role? What part of the Shimer experience prepared you for it? Did it lead to internal advancement or did you find your next job someplace else? Do you think any part of your Shimer experience led to your choice of this position?

What about your next job(s)?

What are you doing now?

How do you think your experience at Shimer affected your choices in selecting and maintaining friends and personal or intimate relationships? Can you give some examples of incidents that might have made a difference?

Looking back on your time at Shimer and since then, have there been occasions when you questioned your decision to attend/leave/graduate from Shimer? What were those thoughts?

Think back to your decision to attend Shimer. How do you think your life would be different had you chosen differently? Do you think that your time at Shimer, even if you did not graduate, had a major and/or lasting effect on your life? Did it change you in ways that might not have occurred at other schools?

Many students enter college with some career goal. Did your time at Shimer lead to any changes in your life plans – and how?

How do you think your approach to work and life demands was shaped by your Shimer experience? For example, when faced with a large project or task, how do you think your evaluation and implementation might have been affected by Shimer's curriculum?

How do cope with constraints or rules? How do you feel that your experience at Shimer prepared you for working in structured organizations? Or led to frustration with those constraints? Or prepared you for being more innovative?

I am going to share seven aspects of a college environment that a researcher identified as being important. For each, can you tell me whether and how that aspect was relevant to your experience at Shimer?

1. Clear & consistent institutional objectives
2. Institutional size (affects institutional impact)
3. Student–faculty relationships
4. Curriculum
5. Teaching
6. Friendships & student communities
7. Student development programs & services

What else mattered to you that was not on that list?

Appendix G

Demographics / Screening Questions

Name:

Address:

Sex/gender:

Phones: (h) (c) (w)

Email:

Years attended Shimer:

Were you an early entrant?

How large was the place where you grew up?

Small town?

Large city?

Suburb in large metropolitan area?

Somewhere in-between?

Were you the first in your family to attend and/or graduate from college?

Did you graduate from Shimer?

Did you attend other colleges after Shimer?

Where?

What degrees/ programs?

What job(s) have you worked in for at least a year since leaving Shimer?

Are you willing to participate in a private interview discussing your Shimer experiences and what impact, if any, they have had on your life?

Appendix H

Participant Demographics

Name	Sex	Years Attended	Early Entrant?	Town size growing up	First gen college?	Shimer Graduate?	Attend after Shimer	Grad degrees
Al	M	1968-72	No	suburb	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Angela	F	1966-69	Yes	suburb	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Carol	F	1969-72	No	suburb	No	No	Yes	Yes
Ian	M	1962-63	Yes	in-between	No	No	Yes	No
Irene	F	1962-63	Yes	in-between	No	No	Yes	Yes
Irv	M	1965-69	No	small	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jack	M	1966-69	No	small	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Joan	F	1969-73	No	large	No	Yes	Yes	No
Joseph	M	1971-74	No	small	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Kathy	F	1966-68	Yes	suburb	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Larry	M	1967-70	No	small	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Olivia	F	1963-66	Yes	large	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pete	M	1964-68	Yes	small	No	Yes	Yes	No
Quincy	M	1960-63	No	small	No	Yes	Yes	No
Riley	M	1966-70	No	large	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Zoe	F	1972-76	No	suburb	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Appendix I

Parade Article About Shimer

REPRINTED FROM:

Parade

THE SUNDAY

NEWSPAPER MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 27, 1966

SHIMER COLLEGE STUDENTS & TEACHERS LEARN TOGETHER

by R. H. HUBBARD

"**T**his is a fascinating place; you don't just study books, you study each other." With that observation, Marc Nelsen, a portly, bearded senior from Los Angeles, probably put his finger on the quality that makes Shimer College here special to both students and faculty alike. For the nearly 500 bright young men and women and their teachers on the tiny campus in western Illinois are engaged in a continuing pursuit of knowledge—and finding it as much in their constant debates with each other as in their classrooms.

"Our students are taught to question, probe and challenge everything they encounter—in their reading, in their classmates' statements and especially in what we say," notes Harry Golding, who taught at DePauw University before joining the faculty here. "So they're constantly looking for further intellectual challenges wherever they can find them."

RIGID CURRICULUM

At Shimer, students and teachers have plenty to talk about, because they all take the same courses. For the better part of their first three years, all students follow a rigidly prescribed curriculum. Each course is related to every other course, so that students get a broad picture of how all fields of knowledge affect one another. And in order to hold their own, the teachers hold regular seminars for themselves so they can all keep up with what's happening in the classrooms.

There are plenty of Ph.D.'s on Shimer's faculty but no professors, because the only faculty title here is "teacher." Dr. F. J. Mullin, dean at the School of Medicine at the University of Chicago before being named president here in

1954, says, "Our teachers don't simply fill students' heads with bits of knowledge. Their job is to help them discover things for themselves. No teacher should ask a student a question if he already knows the answer himself, because they're all learning together."

Lectures are virtually nonexistent at Shimer. The 80-minute class periods—with never more than 20 to a class—are usually devoted to discussions of assigned readings from original material. Textbooks are a rarity, used only in subjects like math, where there's a need for specific basic knowledge. And English is nowhere to be found on the list of courses offered at Shimer. A few years ago the faculty decided that since so much stress is put on accurate and persuasive expression in all classes and examinations, there was no need for a separate course.

Shimer was founded in 1853 as a

women's college, but it wasn't until 1950 that it became coeducational. Dr. Mullin came to Shimer because he saw here "a great opportunity to reverse the trend in our colleges toward turning out super-technicians instead of educated people. Here we try to give students a broad background and an understanding of society as a whole before they start to specialize."

The college's small size and its isolation from urban centers were necessary to the approach he had in mind, Dr. Mullin points out. "It's the community of scholars idea—everyone studying and living close together, with every student knowledgeable in every field, and education the focus of their entire life at college."

Most of the entering students at Shimer are top scorers on college board exams. They're given placement exams to see at what level they should start



Even as they stroll on Shimer's tranquil campus, students keep up a running fire of lively conversation. Dress is casual, but their minds are highly disciplined.



Shimer president, Dr. F. J. Mullin, listens as student makes a point. Faculty members constantly find themselves cornered for talks like this one.

LIKE ANYPLACE ELSE?

There are plenty of "brains" here, but few bookworms. The zest for learning creates the kind of school spirit that at other colleges is usually focused on football and fraternities—neither of which are to be found at Shimer. There is a lot of long hair—on both boys and girls—and not a few beards. Some try to pooh-pooh their intellectual reputation. "We sit in our rooms and talk about boys and how long to soak underwear before you wash it, just like anyplace else," one girl protested.

But if there is protest against being stereotyped as mental giants, it takes a back seat to the students' primary purpose in being at Shimer. "These young people know what they want here, and they make sure they get it," says Robert Blackburn, Dean of Faculty. "They're aware of the all-importance of our comprehensive exams, and they've even got up petitions criticizing them for being too easy. Believe me, we have to stay on our toes to keep ahead of our students!"

here. "Students progress as fast as they can," Dr. Mullin emphasizes. "Our requirements are rigid, but how they are met is left entirely flexible."

To graduate, a student must pass nine seven-hour comprehensive examinations. These are given in the major fields of study and are based on new material assigned several months in advance. A student can take a comprehensive exam any time he feels he's ready. Normally, three are taken during the first year, with the others spread out. But many students graduate after only three years—sometimes earlier.

While the emphasis is on broad general education, Shimer makes ample provision for specialization with "concentration courses" in specific fields. "I feel my science students who decide to concentrate on chemistry are better prepared when they finish here than my chemistry majors were at DePauw,"

Harry Golding asserts. That the Shimer approach works is indicated by the fact that more than 70 per cent of its students go on to graduate schools.

"We're all underachievers here," a pretty blonde coed named Lorene Hamilton told *PARADE*. She meant every word of it, even though she has a "B" average, is confident she'll be doing graduate work at Harvard or the University of Chicago after she gets her college degree this June—and isn't quite 17 yet!

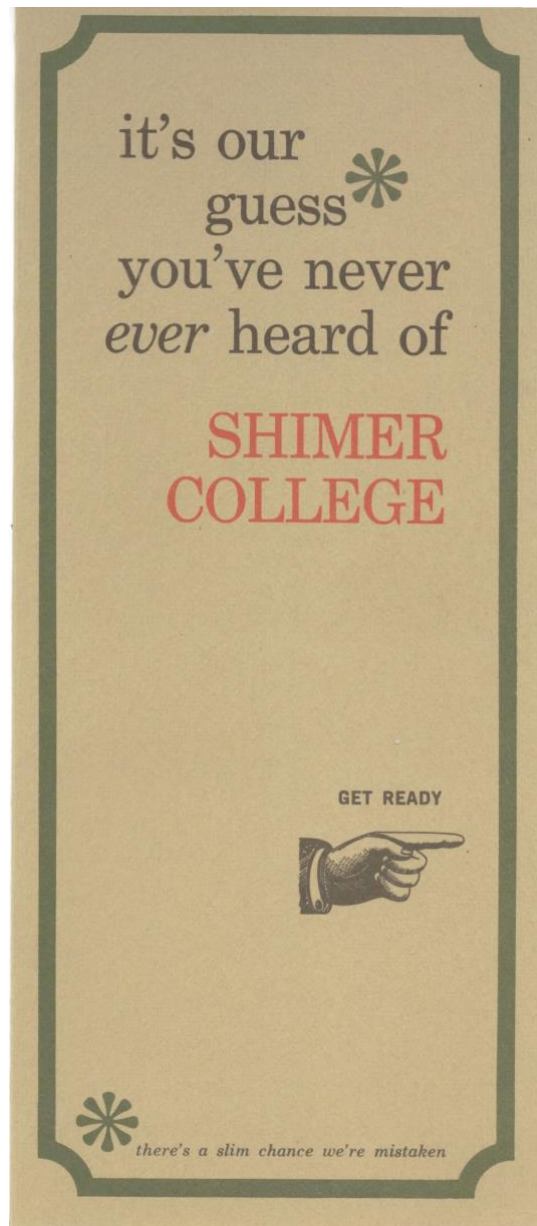
Lorene is one of the "early entrants"—those who enter college after their second or third year of high school—who usually make up about one-fourth of the student body here. And in her own way, she was explaining how Shimer's heady intellectual atmosphere develops such a thirst for knowledge that few of the students feel they're getting enough of it.

SC-24

"Shimer College: Students & Teachers Learn Together," R. H. Hubbard, *Parade: The Sunday Newspaper Magazine*, February 27, 1966.

Appendix J

Shimer College Brochure



SHIMER
COLLEGE

is the
1,482nd
LARGEST
college
in the
ENTIRE
**UNITED
STATES**

MORE



THERE'S MORE



SHIMER hasn't got a marching band.

It hasn't got a football team, either.

Or a fraternity. Or a sorority.

Or 22,000 students from every part of the STATE.

Sound dull and untraditional?

WELL . . .

Shimer DOES have 500 fine, serious, questioning scholars from just about everywhere. (Would you believe from just about 500 fine high schools throughout the country?)

We boast a curriculum of true liberal arts in a rare, intellectual atmosphere, with a program aimed at the pre-professional level (almost 80% of Shimer's grads go directly into graduate study).

Our tree-shaded, northern Illinois campus is exceptionally attractive.

And we have the ivy-covered walls and columned buildings colleges are supposed to have. But that's as traditional as we get.

We have small group discussion classes.

And placement exams to determine your entrance level.

The reading is in original works.

And qualified H.S. juniors and seniors may take advantage of a unique Early Entrance Program.

The options include independent study, tutorials and a smashing year abroad at Oxford, England.

Still sound dull?

O.K., then you don't have to send us the enclosed card requesting the particulars.

But may we ask a favor?

Please don't tell anyone else about this . . .

We're keeping Shimer a secret.

Shimer College, *It's Our Guess*, 1966.

Appendix K

Part of Shimer College Mount Carroll Campus



Author's photo, October 26, 2018.

Appendix L

Typical Shimer College Classroom (From Shimer Recruitment Brochure)



Shimer College, *Shimer College*, 1966.

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Biography

Jonathan Goldman has been the Director of IT and Security in the Volgenau School of Engineering at George Mason University since 2001. In that position, he has managed the Computing Resources department, and has been responsible for supporting the students, faculty, and staff in the school. Among his responsibilities have been support for distance learning and acting as co-chair of two campus IT committees. He also has presented on multiple topics at George Mason's fall conferences on Innovations in Teaching and Learning. Prior to working at GMU, Jonathan was the computer operations manager at Virginia Hospital Center from 1987 to 2001.

Before entering the IT field, Jonathan worked as a wholesale manufacturers' sales representative in the photographic equipment industry from 1979 to 1987. From 1969 to 1979 he worked in retail marketing in various areas of responsibility including buying, advertising, and as a manager.

Jonathan earned his Bachelor of Arts from Marymount University and his Master of Business Administration in Leadership from Virginia Polytechnic Institute.