

## 2021 NSSE Significant Learning Experience Module Open-Ended Response Summary

### Overview

St. Olaf administered the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the Spring of 2021 to first-years and seniors. In addition to the base survey instrument, we chose to add an optional question on significant learning experiences. Of the 678 first-years and seniors who responded to the survey, 294 answered the following open-ended question: “Please describe the most significant learning experience you have had so far at this institution.” Amongst the respondents, 154 (52%) were first-year students and 140 (48%) were senior students. Overall, respondents were more likely to list experiences in the classroom<sup>1</sup> as being their most significant learning experiences rather than out of classroom experiences (59% of respondents compared to 40% of respondents). However, senior respondents were more likely to mention significant *out of classroom* experiences than first-year respondents, with about 44% of senior students mentioning out-of-class factors compared to about 34% of first-year students.

Out of all respondents, the classroom experiences most commonly listed as providing significant learning were those that introduced them to new perspectives such as a multicultural lens, a differing viewpoint, or increased social awareness. Another commonly listed characteristic were classes that encouraged personal growth in a student. Both first-years and seniors valued classes that resulted in the development of their personal values or the development of their passion/goals. Other commonly mentioned classroom factors were a professor’s instruction style and capability, the applicability of course material to a student’s career goals or life outside of college, and class discussions.

For students in both class years who listed out of class factors as their most significant learning experience, the most frequent responses described the experience of understanding and navigating structural racism in the institution of St. Olaf and the predominantly white culture of the campus. Additionally, both first-year and senior respondents listed out-of-class experiences that caused moments of personal growth for them such as learning how to be independent, managing one’s time, and developing personal values. Students also mentioned that the social sphere of campus helped them develop interpersonal skills and learn from other students via conversations, especially with other students who did not share the same background as their

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<sup>1</sup> Classroom experiences were considered to be any event or circumstance that occurred in regular class activities or scheduled class time such as classroom discussions, the acquisition of specific skills from a class, or a professor’s teaching style. Also included in this category were moments of personal growth or reflection that occurred as a result of class activities. Comments including study abroad experiences or job training related to a specialized major such as teaching practicums or nursing clinicals were not included in this category as only a subset of the population participates in them, they take place off campus, and they are often taught by non-St. Olaf faculty.

own. Out of class academic opportunities such as study abroad, job training, and internships were also important experiences for senior students.

### **In Class Experiences**

As mentioned above, the most common significant learning experiences within the classroom for both class years were exposure to new perspectives (19.4%), opportunities for personal growth (16.0%), professor instruction/behavior (10.5%), applicability of the course (7.8%) and classroom discussions (5.1%). For comments relating to the introduction of a new perspective, three common themes emerged: the presentation of a multicultural lens, a differing viewpoint, or development of social awareness. All three types of these comments were mentioned frequently by students. For example, one first-year student wrote, *“Recently, having to write a research paper on the Qur'an was significant to me because I got to learn more and gain a more in-depth understanding of a culture that I don't have a background in.”* Another first-year student described how, though the last election was divisive, the conversations they had in their classes regarding the political and social issues in the school community and country helped them *“learn of other people's perspective.”* For comments relating to personal growth in the classroom, students suggested that their most significant learning experiences allowed them to identify and develop their value system. One first-year student explained that, *“Great Con has helped me explore my own religious and ethical identity and how they compare to those around me.”*

In terms of professor instruction/behavior, respondents highlighted how a professor might make the class more engaging through their passion for the subject or by allowing them to think about course material in a new way. For instance, a first-year student wrote, *“The most inspiring course I have taken so far has been in psychopharmacology. The professor was encouraging and dynamic, and she made the online course feel like an in-person experience. She made me want to pursue neuroscience as a concentration!”* They also mentioned the professor's ability to make them comfortable asking questions as an important factor.

When discussing applicability in the classroom, students appreciated when a course involved “real world” examples or applications that grounded the material. Many respondents also described how it was impactful when they were able to find connections in their daily lives with the knowledge they gained in a course. This type of comment ranged across all disciplines and majors from math to political science to literature. As one first-year student wrote, *“Having a scientific understanding of how everything is working in the world at an atomic scale is so cool to think about, and now in my daily life I feel like I can apply these concepts to better understand why things are the way they are.”* Some students discussing applicability in the classroom also described how certain experiences or skills they gained might help them when they graduate or influence their career choices.

Finally, the respondents that noted classroom discussions as being significant learning experiences described how classroom discussions helped them have meaningful and thoughtful conversations about course material. For some, this helped them learn the material better. Students also mentioned learning how to have productive conversations with others when expressing disagreement. One first-year student wrote, *“Classroom discussions with both the professor and fellow students has been the most significant learning experience for me. Being able to have open, respectful conversations with people from different backgrounds was beneficial to my learning. I am able to connect what we discuss to other classes and life outside the classroom.”*

### **In Class Experiences - Differences in Class Years**

Other common classroom-related responses varied by class year, however. For example, many first-year students mentioned First-Year Writing and First-Year Religion (BTS-B GE) as a significant learning experience at a rate much higher than senior students (9% compared to <1%) who would have taken those courses several years ago. Other factors more often valued by first-year students were classes’ connections to current issues, involvement in conversation programs, and a professor’s instructional capability. First-year respondents also mentioned more frequently how the pandemic affected their learning experiences, with most describing that their class or professor was not able to overcome the obstacles presented by COVID effectively. This was mentioned by 6.5% of first-year students compared to 0% of senior students. Another somewhat negative experience mentioned by first-year students more frequently was that classes and their workload were too challenging, which negatively affected their academic capability and/or confidence. One first-year student wrote: *“Academically, I think my most significant learning experience was adjusting to the learning curve of attending a higher level institution. Especially while being in the STEM classes that are sometimes referred to as “weeder” classes...I think these kind of classes can be harmful to academic confidence.”*

For senior students, one of the most important aspects of their classroom learning experiences was the opportunity to develop skills such as public speaking, research skills, or math and science problem solving. This was emphasized by senior students more than first-year students (11% compared to <1% of first-year students). Another factor specific to senior respondents was their ability to develop their passion/goals (8% compared to 3% of first-year students). Many discussed how a particular class influenced the career path they are on now or made them realize they wanted to help people in some way. Senior students also valued the ability to speak with faculty about their career path more than first-years (6% compared to <1%). One senior student wrote, *“Discussions with faculty has helped me realize how important it is to communicate and actively connect with others that may help you with your interest.”* Thus, senior students appeared to be thinking ahead to their futures and valued experiences that would help them

prepare for graduation more than first-year students who were more focused on their immediate circumstances.

### **Out of Classroom Experiences**

For respondents in both class years who mentioned out of classroom learning experiences, comments frequently contained mention of understanding and navigating structural racism on campus (10.5%), learning from peers through conversations and interactions (9.5%), learning how to be independent/managing one's time (5.4%), and developing personal values (3.7%). Discussion of structural racism and racial incidents on campus was a large and varied topic of interest for students. Some of the most commonly mentioned experiences centered around the Oles Against Inequality (OAI) march that occurred in the fall of 2020. In comments mentioning the march, some students explained that they gained an appreciation for the experience of Black students on campus and came to terms with the inequalities present at St. Olaf. One first-year student wrote, *“There was a short line of speakers [at the march] who expressed their experiences being the color that they are, and more specifically their experiences attending an institution where the majority of its students and faculty are white. I not only took away a lot from this experience about what it is like being a black individual in today's world, but also how the institution I attend has failed to be an advocate for these individuals.”*

Other students discussed how they better understand the difficulties of starting and withstanding a movement in an institution like St. Olaf. Students described how challenging it was to mobilize a community and keep the momentum going when the student body cycled in and out so frequently. Similar comments did not mention the march specifically but instead addressed the larger issue of racism on campus. They discussed their growing realization of the problem, the inaction of the administration, and how sometimes this motivated them to get involved in change on campus. For example, a first-year student wrote, *“Learning about the ways in which this campus needs to change its treatment of marginalized people and yet deciding to stay here so I can help change the culture here. I got a job in the diversity office as a facilitator at meetings on inclusion that starts next year which I'm very excited about.”* Others did not feel as optimistic and described how they learned to distrust authority and any promises made by administrators due to the lack of policy change and transparency that they witnessed.

Learning through peer relationships and interpersonal dynamics was a common theme in both class years. Students mentioned factors such as developing friendships and interacting with other students on campus, meeting people of different backgrounds, and navigating interpersonal situations that occur from community living. Respondents described learning from their peers through intellectual conversations and by listening to their lived experiences. One senior student explained, *“...learning from other students and friends giving me advice about their experiences has been by far the most genuine and impactful connection and learning opportunity I have had*

*at this institution.” Another wrote, “I think that this school has broadened my worldview by allowing me to interact with students/faculty that have differing viewpoints, and that has been the most significant learning experience I’ve had here.”*

Students of both class years mentioned that their most significant learning experience was developing their independence at school and learning how to manage their time. In these comments, respondents discussed how they learned how to take care of themselves and their personal health after leaving home. Others talked about becoming more emotionally independent by learning how to take initiative and stand up for themselves, learning how to be confident in a new place, or by learning how to be alone for periods of time. Students explained that they gained skills in time management and scheduling as well as they often had to juggle their schoolwork, social life, and extracurriculars at the same time. Similarly, students tended to talk about how they have grown as a person and realized their own personal identity. They mentioned strengthening traits such as empathy and understanding through their personal relationships. Students also communicated that they have a better sense of what they want from their lives. One senior student commented, *“I have learned a lot about myself, my strengths, working with others, and being a leader. As a student-athlete, I have learned how to balance my time, and how to be more confident in myself. That newfound confidence gave me the strength to follow my passion and decide to pursue my future career.”*

### **Outside Classroom Experiences - Differences in Class Years**

One of the largest differences between the two class years involved pursuits and interests that were academic in nature but fell out of the scope of “in class” learning. Examples of this included study abroad experiences, jobs (including job training/fieldwork), internships, and research (including CURI). Seniors were significantly more likely to mention such activities with 43 seniors (31%) mentioning these experiences compared to only 1 first-year (<0.01%). This difference was partially due to the fact that first-year students are not typically allowed to participate in study abroad programs. Taking study abroad out of consideration, however, senior students were still more likely to mention these educational experiences. Based on their comments, seniors seemed to value hands-on activities that mimicked the world they would face after graduation or prepared them better for their desired profession. A large portion of seniors mentioned specific job training that they have received through their major such as education practicums or job shadowing. For example, one senior student wrote, *“I spent a January term shadowing a social worker in Minneapolis as part of the Education 170 course. That allowed me to learn about the Twin Cities and work with students. I interacted with students ages 3-13 of varying races, ethnicities, abilities and socio-economic status. I got to see teachers and student support professionals in action which was amazing.”* First-years had not had as much time at St. Olaf, giving them less opportunity to immerse themselves in extracurriculars or qualify for hands-on training.

Within this category, senior students' emphasis on study abroad was likewise pronounced. Mentions of “study abroad” and “studying abroad” were the most frequently used two-word phrases besides “St. Olaf.” Around 18% of seniors mentioned study abroad as their most significant learning experience compared to 0% of first-years. They discussed positive aspects of their study abroad such as being immersed in new cultures, putting their education into practice, and learning course material in context. This made their learning more meaningful and impactful. As one senior student described, *“My study abroad trip to Greece was probably the most significant because it made all the work I've done in translating Ancient Greek actually feel real.”*

Another difference in out-of-class learning experiences between the class years was the importance of the social scene. First-year respondents were slightly more likely to mention peer relationships or interactions than seniors (11% compared to 8%). Several first-years noted and appreciated the welcoming community that they found themselves in upon entering college. As first-year students, they were likely more focused on this aspect of their college experience as they attempted to find their place within the student population. Seniors may have noticed this factor less once they were more established and used to the social dynamics of campus.

Going along with this theme was the difference in response rates for issues related to racism on campus. For first-year students for instance, the OAI march was during their first week of college and it seemed to leave a strong, lasting impression. Though senior students also mentioned the OAI march and other experiences surrounding it frequently in their comments, first-year students did so at a higher rate. Using a test statistic that measures the relative frequency of phrases for a specific group compared to the frequency of the larger population in general, the words “racial,” “protest,” and “march” took the top three spots for the first-year group. In comparison, the phrases shown to be most relatively important to senior students were “studying,” “guidance,” and “goals.” Further evidence of this difference comes from the fact that 12% of first-year students mentioned racial issues on campus, compared to only 8% of senior students. First-year respondents were also more likely (3% compared to <0.01% of seniors) to write about adjusting to life at a predominantly white institution, which included elements like navigating the social and political systems as a person of color, and developing their identity while feeling isolated on campus. One first-year student commented, for instance, that their most significant learning experience was, *“Learning how to adapt to living on a white campus and the microaggressions that come with it. Learning to love myself and my identity despite said microaggressions.”* For first-year students, any difference between their home/high school environment and the campus environment may be more fresh in their minds than it is for senior students. One example of this can be seen in a comment from one first-year student: *“For me living on campus has been somewhat of a culture shock. Coming from a lower-socioeconomic class and from a diverse city, my college is on the other end of the spectrum. Everyday*

*interactions play out differently than they would at home. The lack of diversity is a change that I am still trying to get used to.”*

## **Conclusion**

Both in and out of the classroom, first-year and senior respondents were often in agreement about their significant learning experiences. Both valued exposure to new ideas and perspectives that might challenge their beliefs or give them the opportunity to develop their values. Instructor capability was an important factor that was often mentioned in conjunction with comments about a course and therefore contributing to what made the course significant. First-year and senior students both valued classroom experiences that were applicable either to their personal or professional lives. Out of the classroom, students in both years remarked often about racial issues on campus, the social scene and relationships they surrounded themselves with, and opportunities for personal growth that they experienced, whether through their peers or by transitioning to college and taking on new independence.

When comparing first-years to seniors, however, the value placed on some learning experiences did seem to shift slightly. First-year respondents tended to describe factors centered more on their present circumstances such as specific classes or significant recent events. Meanwhile, senior respondents seemed to focus more on their big picture goals as they expand beyond the confines of a classroom and concentrate on their areas of interests through hands-on learning, leadership in student organizations, and job training.