

NSSE 2023 Open-Ended Response Summary

At the end of the survey, students were given the following open-ended prompt: “What one change would most improve the educational experience at this institution, and what one thing should not be changed?” Overall, 277 students (43% of all survey respondents) answered this question (270 mentioned at least one improvement, and 159 described at least one aspect of St. Olaf that shouldn’t change). As might be expected when asking a large and diverse group of students about their experiences, comments from each side focused on similar things and were thus grouped into broader categories. Suggestions for improvement were more likely to be related to themes around the campus environment (such as climate and DEI efforts), while affirmations of things the College does well were more likely to focus on student support, with academics falling somewhere in the middle.

Academics (23% of suggestions for improvement and 27% of positive comments)

- ***Targets for improvement:***
 - Adding to the variety of areas of study offered, options for majors/concentrations (several mentioned the option for a language concentration), or increasing the diversity of content covered within disciplines
 - “Providing more majors in more specified fields, such as engineering or other specialized programs.” (First-Year student)
 - “One thing that would improve the educational experience is having a wider variety of majors and concentrations(minors), especially having the option to have a language concentration.” (First-Year student)
 - “I think that statistics and data science should be a major instead of just a concentration. I also wish that there was an option for a Spanish concentration rather than just a Spanish major.” (Senior student)
 - “Making more courses less focused on just european perspectives/ only having white professors” (Senior student)
 - “I think it would be important to implement more diversity into learning into the classroom. For instance, requiring courses to implement more about different cultures or as a credit requiring students to take 1-2 classes that expose students to a variety of different cultures / history.” (Senior student)

- Reducing or changing the general education requirements
 - “Allow students to waive maybe 1 or 2 GE requirements because I wish I could go deeper in my own major/minor.” (Senior student)
 - “Change the general education requirements to be less restrictive” (Senior student)
 - “I think a greater focus on making everyone more multidisciplinary, rather than multidisciplinary only if you are aiming for STEM fields, as it seems all STEM majors need to get some grasp of the humanities, but not all humanities majors need to gain that grasp of STEM fields. The abstract is important, but so is the concrete, and both together will improve your understanding of the world.” (First-Year student)
 - “I think less focus on the OLE core requirements to graduate and more focus on major-specific classes right from your first year.” (First-Year student)
 - “I'd prefer degree requirements to be tailored towards different majors if that's possible” (First-Year student)
 - “I'm not sure how this would be changed, but currently it is very easy for students to blow off the OLE core requirements as a waste of time and not even try to get something out of the classes. In my opinion, this defeats the purpose of attending a liberal arts college. This is especially true with the students who need better critical thinking skills. I have met a group of students who are very dismissive of gender equality, LGBTQ issues, environmental issues, and are also just disrespectful in general . . . This is the same group that dismisses their learning in their classes, cheats on exams, and blows off homework. It's incredibly frustrating to know that students like this attend a campus that advertises being inclusive and open minded. I wish there was a way to ensure that they take their classes seriously and really reflect on how they treat others.” (First-Year student)
- More opportunities to apply learning in practical and relevant ways (e.g., research/service-learning opportunities, other real-world experiences), moving beyond traditional lecture-based learning

- “Shifting the focus from drilling skills into student minds to helping students grow and develop. While our academic work is important and critical for our future, I feel as though we are not prepared as people for the outside world. Civic engagement is a great way to encourage this and should be more heavily incorporated into coursework.” (Senior student)
- “I think that one thing that students would really benefit from is the implementation of more service-learning classes. Currently there are a decent amount of options, but I think that the classes themselves and the experiences and contexts they provide are super significant in the process of a student's higher learning and professional career preparation. It's one thing to discuss real-world applications in a classroom, and completely different to actually go into a functioning community and observe the concepts at work and their effects.” (First-Year student)
- “I believe St. Olaf's education could be most improved by removing the emphasis on theory and memorization in classes and refocusing on an environment of critical discussion, service, and action. I believe real-world experience can bring more change and development than isolated, pedantic lectures.” (Senior student)
- Greater support for particular departments or areas
 - “One thing that would be improved in the computer science major would be actually hiring enough faculty for the number of students in the major.” (Senior student)
 - “Continued financial investment in the Performing arts would allow the for a more robust experience for fine arts majors.” (Senior student)
 - “The largest improvements would be to see all the departments supported equally here at St. Olaf. I like the new OLE core but I don't agree with the released fall agenda of the PLT to shift our resources towards STEM fields leaving other departments to deteriorate. Currently, there is a trend towards STEM fields and majors, which is understandable, because that is where the workforce is heading. However, as a liberal arts college we cannot and never will be able to truly compete with large research institutions offering specific degrees in each STEM field.” (Senior student)

- Changes to the SOAR program
 - “I think that the SOAR program should be focused only on the first week of school as it seems unnecessary to me as a student at this point in the year.” (First-Year student)
 - “I really dislike the first year Soar program. I think it was useful in the first semester but it isn't in the second.” (First-Year student)
- **Strengths/what should not be changed:**
 - Course offerings/requirements
 - “Not change: variety of programs available and variety of options to fulfill GE reqs” (First-Year student)
 - “The ability to take courses from all kinds of departments regardless of one's major is really valuable. I've discovered new interests and passions because of this, and I am grateful to be able to explore other areas of study I enjoy outside the ones I'm most focused on.” (Senior student)
 - “I do appreciate the wide variety of graduation requirements, though, as I've learned a lot more from a lot of different areas that I would at a non-liberal arts institution. It's really cool to feel like I have more well-rounded awareness of how my academic interests intersect.” (Senior student)
 - “Something I don't believe should change is the options available for course of studies. I understand that there has been an increasing trend where schools have begun removing majors, and what I like about my institution is that not only can you explore dozens of majors but on top of that if you still can't find something that piques your interest, you can design your own major. Choices like those are what I hope never changes as it truly allows us to be unique.” (First-Year student)
 - The structure of the academic year
 - “The credit structure (4 per semester) is one thing I think should not be changed.” (First-Year student)
 - “I think one thing the school does well is class scheduling (i.e. times offered, time between classes, MWF and T/TH classes).” (First-Year student)

- “Interim is also something that should stay. It gives a great opportunity to explore; whether that be a particular class, travel, or a hands-on experience, and does work well as a change of pace.” (First-Year student)
 - Rigor of courses
 - “I would not change the rigor of academic classes, as I also feel the best learning comes when people are pushed slightly beyond their comfort zone. That being said, measures need to be taken to ensure students recognize and can worth through this discomfort effectively.” (Senior student)
 - “I think that the current level of academic rigor should not be changed or decreased.” (Senior student)
 - Class sizes/low student-to-faculty ratio
 - “One thing that should remain a priority is low student-faculty ratios that encourage close relationships between students and professors.” (Senior student)
 - “One thing that should not change is the small ratio of students to professors.” (Senior student)
 - “I appreciate the class sizes and also the variety of class sizes. My psych lecture was around 100 people and that felt perfect, and my French class is under 20. I think that these foster good conversations and lectures and I appreciate this.” (First-Year student)

Campus Environment (41% of suggestions for improvement and 21% of positive comments)

- ***Targets for improvement:***

- Campus climate, including additional support for/inclusion of students with particular identities or perspectives and de-emphasizing the “busy-ness culture” on campus
 - “Clearer commitment to and demonstrated action toward racial justice, disability access, and environmental sustainability would increase my confidence in the institution and its future.” (Senior student)

- “One thing that should be changed is more support for marginalized groups on campus. Whether through funding, enhanced marketing, or encouragement (ex: with extra credit), students on campus should be more engaged with content that does not represent the predominantly white community.” (First-Year student)
- “The school really needs to improve their efforts to combat racism and promote DEI. As a predominantly white institution, major changes need to occur like discussing what microaggressions/etc are, teach ways to address them and how to avoid them, and make efforts in making all students feel welcome and safe. Online module training one time is not enough - continuous discussions inside the classroom need to occur in all subjects.” (Senior student)
- “change: making actual changes to supporting BIPOC and first generation students, don't just 'hand' students off to TRIO and expect them to fix everything” (Senior student)
- “As a white, straight, Christian woman I would like to feel accepted by my peers and professors for who I am. I often feel that I am looked down upon and that I am an outcast because I do not identify with a different sexual orientation, race, ect. It can be hard to succeed academically when I do not feel safe to be the person that I am.” (First-Year student)
- “the institution could possibly better promote acceptance of people with different ideas about social issues and politics.” (First-Year student)
- “I think something that would improve the educational experience here would be minimizing pressure on students to continue to do more than is necessary. The motto 'Oles can, Oles will' adds unnecessary stress to students' experience because it tends to make us feel like we constantly need to be doing something, which takes away all of our time for rest and recreation. There is an atmosphere of competition at the school, which I don't think is in everyone's best interest.” (Senior student)
- “Teaching students how to balance their lives. St. Olaf students are infamous for overcommitting, being over-involved, and there becomes this massive toxic pressure to do everything and be well rounded students. St. Olaf either needs to recognize the massive non-academic interests and pursuits of its students and readjust its

academic rigor or de-emphasize student involvement. In general, there is a immense pressure to succeed academically that can be stifling. Student generally do not feel comfortable going to professors asking for extensions even for valid reasons due to the high academic standards that do little to help the already dismal mental health of students.” (Senior student)

- Increasing diversity on campus
 - “A more diverse student body would enrich all parts of the learning and living experience.” (Senior student)
 - “An improvement would be to create a more racially/ethnically diverse student body. The student body remains to be predominantly and evidently white.” (First-Year student)
 - “Black Female Profs!!!! There isn’t any representation from the professors of Black women and it inherently shows me that Olaf is not a place for Black Women not only in the general student body, but also in the faculty.” (First-Year student)
 - “Hire more diverse staff and aim to have a higher population of students of color/international students.” (Senior student)
 - “I think there could be more about diversity in religious affiliation, and how that can affect the way people are treated based on other forms of diversity.” (First-Year student)
 - “I would like to see this school get more diverse not only with race and ethnicities but with the income background as well. There have been many many times on this campus where I have been humbled by the people around me especially with the matter of money. There are maybe 5 other people that are around the same background as I am and those are the only people I will talk to on campus because they don't make me feel bad about being poor.” (First-Year student)
- Opportunities for students to provide feedback or for student feedback to be taken seriously; greater transparency from leadership
 - “I believe if the school provided space for general feedback and then actually took that seriously it would a much better place for students, faculty, and staff.” (Senior student)

- “improved if they had a better way of listening to students' critical voices and discussing them more publicly” (First-Year student)
- “The one change I would make is that there needs to be a way to listen to students more, and not the students who already get heard from who have resources and a pathway that has been made for them, but the students who are struggling at the school or in general. These students are the ones that should be asked where we should be improving.” (Senior student)
- “Students and faculty should have more of a say concerning policies/programs and changes within the institution. Administration seems to think they know what's best for everyone without even asking them.” (Senior student)
- “change the transparency of leadership (make board of regents meetings more accessible and especially not entirely private/release transcripts of the meetings while the students the meetings affect are still enrolled instead of after)” (Senior student)
- “More transparency about everything like how decisions are being made, how things are progressing, what flaws are present and what are they working to improve, the reason behind their changes, etc.” (Senior student)
- More opportunities to socialize and build community
 - “Improve: promoting opportunities for people to make friends and social groups through avenues that are not sports.” (Senior student)
 - “Building a true sense of community amongst a student body that seems so ready to toss each other away.” (Senior student)
 - “I would change the first year orientation. I don't think there was enough time to get to know people.” (First-Year student)
 - “Post-covid much of the campus community I learned to love had died. Students have been significantly affected by the pandemic and the policy of the school during that time. While these were reasonable at the time that does not mean that it did not come without consequence. Students overall lack a commitment to each other leading to ineffective student organizations (SGA and Programming Board especially).” (Senior student)

- “I wish there were more opportunities to improve the social lives of students. I have never been more lonely in my entire life.”
(First-Year student)
- **Strengths/what should not be changed:**
 - Sense of community on campus
 - “Not Changed: St. Olaf’s center around community. I think a lot of work needs to be done on how community is created and how ‘Ole culture’ is created, but I think they are both key components to the culture and community of the school.” (Senior student)
 - “Do not change: St. Olaf has a family vibe about it. We trust each other to leave our belongings everywhere and I feel very safe. If I were at a big university I would not feel as safe. Keep the institution small and competitive to get into.” (Senior student)
 - “One thing that should not change it the tight nit community at St. Olaf.” (First-Year student)
 - “I would not change the community based campus because I think it helps incoming students a lot.” (First-Year student)
 - “I think St. Olaf shouldn’t change the community activities, such as events like the jazz band nights, Harry Potter night, Prez ball, Casino nights, all great ideas and fun things to do with friends.”
(First-Year student)
 - Emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion
 - “I don’t believe my institution should change what they are doing to promote equality and fairness among all groups and people of different identities.” (First-Year student)
 - “One thing that should not be changed is the diversity of student groups which allow for the inclusion of individuals of any identity.”
(First-Year student)
 - “I would not change the encouragement of creating a inclusive campus community.” (Senior student)
 - “Something that should not be changed is the celebration of diversity in general and the appreciation for all peoples of the world.” (Senior student)

Student support (26% of suggestions for improvement and 41% of positive comments)

- **Targets for improvement:**
 - Mental/physical health support, including more academic breaks
 - “Allowing for individualized planning for students with mental health issues would be helpful, especially in classroom settings. Also, easier access to counselors would be better.” (First-Year student)
 - “Protect students better. Students should be the college's number one priority. Provide greater aid and funding to student health organizations like the Wellness Center. Neglect and censorship in healthcare are forms of violence. The school having greater faith in students' health initiatives and prioritizing health will raise academic performance, build community, and strengthen post-graduation prospects.” (Senior student)
 - “Putting more emphasis on making sure that even the students that don't seek help for mental illnesses are getting it. That would help a lot for many students. Many people don't seek help because they don't think they need it.” (First-Year student)
 - “I think better counseling services would really go a long way towards improving the mental health of students in this school.” (Senior student)
 - “Having a longer break sometime during the year would help students a lot with burnout, and improve the second semester academically.” (First-Year student)
 - “One change that would most improve my educational experience at my institution is having more little breaks during the semester, in order to secure a balanced mental health.” (First-Year student)
 - Academic advising
 - “First year academic advisors in a major closely related to what you're planning on majoring in, but not exactly what it is (example, a physics prof for someone interested in chemistry, or a soan prof for someone interested in poly sci)” (Senior student)

- “I think making it easier to change advisors, or having advisors that aren't professors, or at least professors who have real experience advising would be helpful.” (First-Year student)
- “I would say first-year academic advisors, at least in my case, could reach out more and offer more support. I have only talked to my advisor once this year, and don't feel comfortable reaching out to him- instead I talk to other professors or my friends.” (First-Year student)
- “Students should be informed to switch advisors as soon as they have an idea what major they want, i had an english advisor for too long and it set me back in the long run.” (Senior student)
- “The single largest change that I think would be easy is to make academic advisors only those faculty members who actually want to be advisors or to have them take training on how the college works. So far my advisor basically knows nothing outside of her department.” (First-Year student)
- “I also think pairing students with the right academic advisor for their needs would be helpful instead of randomizing it.” (First-Year student)
- Support from faculty/staff
 - “Getting professors to reach out when a student is falling behind instead of relying on the student to ask for help.” (First-Year student)
 - “One change that would most improve the educational experience is more emphasis in student-professor relationships (for example, the economics department has a night of bowling with professors and students! These are great ways to get to know professors in a less serious manner/class setting)” (Senior student)
 - “Professors connecting more with individual students about coursework and performance.” (First-Year student)
 - “Diversity and inclusion will be more effective if support staff are better equipped to navigate cultural perspectives on mental and physical health of all kinds.” (Senior student)
- Career development/discernment

- “A change I would like to see made is greater attention to the social and economic realities as they exist off campus. Academics and our education ought to be tailored to prepare us to enter the workforce or another institution and should be relevant and useful.” (First-Year student)
- “I wish there was better support for the **actual** needs of busy college students. For example, if academic advisors would actually give advice on good courses to take to prepare you for what you want to do in the future (even if it's not what everyone else does)” (Senior student)
- “Increased partnership in co-ops/internships for class credit at the institution. A lot of students gain some of their most valuable work experience through school-sponsored partnerships between students and businesses. I wish my institution made more connections with local businesses so that these opportunities were easier to secure.” (Senior student)
- “With liberal arts it's imperative that students develop concrete soft skills for entering the workforce, how to speak with professionals in their field, quality writing skills, a deep understanding of how the professional world works outside of class content . . . Emphasize that success comes not only from classes but what sets you apart is what you do outside of class. To be a liberal arts college is to develop well rounded students who are fully aware and prepared for the real world. Class content, professional awareness, soft and social skills, multicultural consciousness, and an ability to maintain wellbeing through adversity. This is what I believe it means to be an Ole.” (Senior student)
- Accessibility for students with disabilities
 - “I think St. Olaf can do a better job at providing accessibility for physically disabled students. Several of my physically disabled friends are frustrated with the accessibility options currently provided, as there are not elevators in every building or hall, which limits options of where they can live and increases energy spent attending class. Many of the elevators also have issues with their location, functionality, and availability. Additionally, for first year students that might not have a parking pass for a different lot, the

walk to j-lot can potentially be dangerous to a differently abled person.” (First-Year student)

- “I wish some professors were given more training on how to accommodate and effectively teach students with disabilities.” (Senior student)
- “I would say that making access to support for learning disabilities more wide spread and easier to access.” (First-Year student)

- General support/information about resources

- “More on what resources are out there for student and where an how to access them.” (First-Year student)
- “I think St. Olaf could do a lot better job at showing that it values its students while they are attending and not just worried about the following students.” (Senior student)
- “One thing I would change would be information system when it comes to the resources on campus. There is so much available to students on campus and most of these services go unused because of lack of information” (Senior student)

- ***Strengths/what should not be changed:***

- Academic support and other resources

- “One thing that should not be changed is the amount of academic support provided for students (si, ta sessions, writing desk, CASS)” (First-Year student)
- “I think that the student support services (disability accommodations, success center, etc.) are really good here, and not that they necessarily shouldn't be changed but in my opinion are very efficient and effective, and don't need to be changed.” (First-Year student)
- “Not change: SSS should always be available for students in need as it has helped me soooooo much and made my college experience worthwhile and unforgettable!” (Senior student)
- “Something that doesn't need to be changed at St. Olaf is all of the resources that the school makes available to us. It seems as

though we have a resource for every problem we could have as well, and I appreciate that.” (First-Year student)

- Relationships with faculty/staff (some students even named particular faculty and staff)
 - “As for something that should not be changed, professors (for the most part) are incredibly generous and understanding. In the case of some classes, without the ability to openly communicate with professors, I may have done much worse.” (Senior student)
 - “Overall, I think faculty here are pretty outstanding, and I would encourage the school to keep up their hiring practices.” (Senior student)
 - “I think the student-faculty connection is important to making St. Olaf what it is.” (First-Year student)
 - “I would not change how open and friendly office hours can be, especially professors that host office hours in a location other than their office and make them more welcoming.” (First-Year student)
 - “One thing that should not change is the excellent admissions and financial aid departments.” (Senior student)
- Academic advising
 - “One thing that should not be changed is getting an assigned academic advisor and having required/semi-required meetings with them because it helps the process of getting to know them and getting help from them.” (First-Year student)
 - “I liked planning out my schedule with my advisor and creating a 4 year plan.” (Senior student)
 - “Also, I think the school should continue to do Academic advising with a professor. Worked very well for me. They're doing a great job of fostering a sense of community.” (First-Year student)
 - “I think what should not be changed is having an academic advisor that is part of your major, especially for music.” (First-Year student)
- Piper Center

- “As for one thing that should not be changed, I really think St. Olaf has an excellent career center with a lot of resources - if students choose to actively seek it out and use it. Which I think the college does do a good job advertising its resources to students.” (Senior student)
 - “Generally, career advice has been stellar and resources for that should remain high.” (Senior student)
 - “The Piper Center should not be changed, as it is a very valuable resource for students” (Senior student)
 - “Keep programs that help students attend career fairs and events like that.” (First-Year student)
- Financial aid
 - “I think that financial aid should not change! need based aid was a large factor for me to be able to afford higher education, and without it I could not have gotten my degree. and now I am heading to law school on a full ride scholarship because I was able to focus on my studies and not work full time to afford tuition at St. Olaf. I think this was the greatest thing.” (Senior student)
 - “The amount of scholarship that this institution given should not change. It was very generous and made it so I could go here with no debt, which would not have happened at any other institution that I applied to.” (Senior student)
 - “Financial Aid should not be changed, they (at least for me) really considered my needs.” (First-Year student)

Some topics were more unique to either suggestions for improvement or what should remain unchanged.

- ***Targets for improvement:***

- Housing (6% of comments), specifically more opportunities to live off-campus
 - “Allowing more students off campus is a must. The college thinks of every excuse to keep students on campus while others need to be off campus. There is little community for on campus living and there is little to no support while living on campus even though the college advertises that they do. Allowing more students to live off

campus is imperative to enhance the student experience.” (Senior student)

- “I believe that allowing more off campus housing to build community for some groups would be beneficial.” (First-Year student)
- “I think students should have the choice to live off campus after their freshman years, like pretty much any other college. This would help students develop life skills such as communicating with landlords and maintenance workers, finding roommates, cook and provide for themselves, care for pets, etc. I don’t know why all of the athletes get to live off campus and nobody else does.” (Senior student)
- Food (6% of comments)
 - “Forced/mandatory meal plan. Puts financial strain on students for food that often makes students feel sick.” (Senior student)
 - “The dining hall needs to be improved in order to allow for healthier and more diverse meals.” (First-Year student)
 - “One thing St. Olaf should improve is making a more affordable or accessible food. For example, if you’re hungry after seven at night and don’t have money to waste you’re doomed. When you sit in the caf you can eat as much as you want. if you take a to-go box you have to try and cram everything in the itty bitty box. You get back to your dorm eat the box and will be hungry five minutes after. Even if you have swipes left for the day you still can’t go back to the caf and get food. This method was obviously not thought through.” (First-Year student)

- **Strengths/what should not be changed:**

- Co-curricular offerings (9% of comments), especially study-abroad
 - “One thing that shouldn’t change is the study abroad opportunities.” (First-Year student)
 - “Also study abroad program is very strong here, and to continue funding it the way they have been.” (Senior student)
 - “Stay the same: commitment to musical excellence.” (Senior student)

- “Don't Change: many opportunities available for research and internships.” (First-Year student)
- “One thing about a school that should not be changed is the language tables and the language houses I feel like they're really important and they give kids a place to be themselves!” (First-Year student)

The remaining comments (9% of suggestions for improvement and 8% of positive comments) fell into a general “other” grouping (i.e., topics that were mentioned by only 1-2 students).