



# 2024 HEDS Alumni Survey

Administered by the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium

Supplemental Question Report – Open-Ended Questions

The 2024 HEDS Alumni Survey was administered June 5-26 to all alumni with valid email addresses from the Classes of 2013, 2014, 2018, and 2019. This included 2,223 individuals (1,194 from the Classes of 2013/2014, the “10-year cohort,” and 1,029 from the Classes of 2018/2019, the “five-year cohort”). Of these, 420 responded to the survey (19% response rate overall), including 227 from the 10-year cohort and 193 from the 5-year cohort (also a 19% response rate per cohort). This report summarizes alumni responses to the two open-ended supplemental questions near the end of the survey about post-college preparation, along with example quotes from each theme (note that responses are copied verbatim, with no corrections to spelling or grammatical errors, and that many responses reflected more than one theme).

**There were 134 total responses to the question, “During your time at St. Olaf, which specific experience(s) best prepared you for your current role?” Of these:**

- 62 (46%) mentioned specific courses and/or their major(s).
  - “Various discrete math courses (Number Theory, Combinatorics) . . . Two CS courses in particular: Software Development; Algorithms & Data Structures . . . Various electives that turned out to be surprisingly useful or expand into lifelong interests: French 1, Inline Skating, Human Geography” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “My American Studies and History majors were the most important academic experiences I had at St. Olaf. The coursework in those majors developed how I think about the world and connect ideas.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “As a stay-at-home mom, my social work studies, education studies, and family studies all come in handy on a regular basis.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “Critical reading and discussion of complex and varied materials through the Great Conversation Program.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “Math and biology classes: Genetics, Linear algebra, Probability theory, Statistics, Intro to Computer science” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “My academic experiences best prepared me for my current role. The psych major and family studies concentration were really good at preparing me for the basics of my current work and for going into grad school.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)

- 54 (40%) discussed participation in high-impact practices such as undergraduate research, study abroad, or internships.
  - “Working on a project my senior year in the Center for Interdisciplinary Research. What an incredible experience! I'd like to honor Paul Roback for that specifically, but every participant was great to work with. The experience of working on a long-term, complicated project is STILL something I can be proud of on my resume. It was super helpful to learn to communicate with people of vary levels of technical background.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “I'm currently finishing my PhD in chemistry, so my undergraduate research experiences with CURI were the best preparation, in addition to my coursework.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Undergraduate research experience through SOAN department, summer research (McNair/GSEF)” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Studying abroad (I currently live in a foreign country and work on a very diverse team)” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “I am an immigration advisor . . . My study abroad experiences and interactions with international students were key to me finding my field and role.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “My internships and student work roles within the Music Department prepared me best” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “Summer research internships at other institutions (but St. Olaf faculty were instrumental in helping me find these programs and put in competitive applications)” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  
- 45 (34%) listed particular skills they had learned, whether in the classroom (which often overlapped with the mention of particular courses/majors noted above) or through other experiences. This commonly included skills such as writing, critical thinking, oral communication, problem-solving, and working with others.
  - “Double major in English and Biology taught me to be creative and analytical—the perfect combo for a marketer!” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “My time on the football team helped develop the strength, endurance, and focus for my current job, as well as the skill of teamwork to get seemingly overwhelming workload done in a timely manner.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Great Con helped me learn how to write, which has benefited me in every role I have had. Some of my upper-level courses had a large research/writing component, which has been helpful in law.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)

- “Lab groups working through instruction and problem solving, working in a role in the group and coming together when needed to come to conclusions and fix issues.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
- “the hours I spent presenting my ideas and research both inside and outside of class prepared me to be a teacher; by the time it came for me to stand it front of a classroom I felt ready, and I wasn't all that nervous either.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
- “Independent projects for courses where the assignment involved having to go out and find what you would research/write about. Everything in my job revolves around coming up with new ideas and directions and you need to be adept at getting out there and finding the next thing to work on, not just following directions.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
- 34 (25%) talked about co-curricular experiences such as participation or leadership in student organizations, music ensembles, or athletics.
  - “The social-emotional and spiritual learning/growth from singing in choir, particularly under the direction of Dr. Armstrong. I wasn't involved in campus ministry at all at the time and was intending to go into English education, and I credit Dr. A for creating an environment of meaning-seeking and discernment that eventually placed me on this path to becoming a pastor.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “Performing both in theater and choir makes me a much more unique employee than my peers. I have a very STEM based role but unlike a lot of people my age, I find it easy to communicate with non-STEM people what I've done and what it means to them. Too often I hear my peers not aware that what they're saying is being lost on the audience. I largely don't have that problem because of my experiences outside of coursework at St. Olaf.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “Leadership within the St. Olaf Student Congregation, Leadership within the Women's Rugby Club” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Residence life, president of St. Olaf choir, leadership roles in the Education Minnesota Student Program and American Choral Director's Association” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Oddly, accordion club taught me a lot about being flexible and going with the flow. Professor Nichols always told us to focus on taking joy in making music rather than trying to be perfect. It's a sentiment that is very useful to remember in work and in life.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)

- 26 (19%) credited on- and/or off-campus work or volunteer experiences.
  - “tutoring an elementary student (off campus), summer employment as a theatre educator (at St. Olaf and elsewhere)” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “I also appreciated my on-campus employment in admissions that supported me in building my professional confidence.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Opportunity to do my work-study job in the Art Department.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Working with on-campus employment in ways that were directly applicable to my area of study.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Volunteering through VN and Thursdays Table.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  
- 15 (11%) pointed to mentorship from faculty, staff, or alumni.
  - “the Piper Center services, alumni connections” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “mentorship through SOAN department, piper center, and TRIO SSS, McNair/GSEF” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “My art and art history professors and the Flaten Art Musuem” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Building relationships with my faculty and mentors helped build confidence in my ability to communicate with others the things that are important to me and also showed me firsthand what being a good teacher ought to look like.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  
- 9 (7%) mentioned interactions with peers or the residential nature of St. Olaf.
  - “living in residential community with my peers” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “having difficult conversations with peers and faculty (mental health, outlook on life, vocation, etc.)” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “my group of friends was so formative and enriching!” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  
- A few additional comments didn’t fit into the themes above and mentioned things like activism/political involvement, access to the Natural Lands, and general personal development throughout college.

**There were 126 responses to the question, “What should St. Olaf prioritize to better prepare students for life after college?” Of these:**

- 49 (39%) would have appreciated more support around navigating the job market, including:
  - Understanding the broader spectrum of career or graduate education opportunities available, both generally and for specific majors.
    - “For Art, there are many jobs, but steep competition - I would have liked to have someone who worked in the arts (not just in development) to be able to help with those professional elements - and also prepared me for a lot of rejection or lack of response from employers.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
    - “It’s hard to know what the working world is like before you get there. In retrospect, I wish I had heard from more people with different kinds of jobs in my classes. Until I joined the workforce, virtually everything I knew about work came from either my parents (who were not in my field) and my professors, many of whom spent their entire careers as academics.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
    - “More focus on non-corporate jobs for social science graduates - give entire range of grad school options available, talk about different government jobs, non-profit, etc. The career center was pretty corporate focused or traditional grad degrees (Med school, business school etc)” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
    - “Emphasize the importance of college degrees; what each studies entail (return of investment, employability, saturation of market, etc).” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - Key job search advice such as how to market their skills more effectively, network with other professionals, and negotiate salary/benefits.
    - “Offer workshops on how to find apartments, how to negotiate salary, the benefits of working remotely vs finding an office job, how to build a personal brand, how to start a business even if you have zero experience.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
    - “Job preparation beyond resume and cover letter building - i.e. negotiating salary, meaningful networking, navigating career changes, etc.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
    - “Ever since graduation, I feel like it has been a nonstop struggle to succeed and that no one considers as valuable the skills that I have or sees them, whether in applying to PhD programs (which was massively difficult and led mostly to rejection) or in my teaching jobs, where I've so far been laid off and nonrenewed before I could really grow into the roles.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)

- Additional opportunities for mentoring from faculty, staff, or alumni.
  - “I think students would benefit from more networking connection programs, internship opportunities, Piper Center connections trips, and Oles on the Road alumni events in cities around the world.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “Given my experience with my faculty advisor, I would recommend more specific career advice from inside of student's area of study. The Piper center does a great job, but an additional perspective from the faculty who have gone through series this course of class work and then experienced their version of professional life, could be beneficial.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “It was really the opportunities I took advantage of that I felt prepared me to succeed after graduation so it may be helping students connect with others who have that experience to encourage them to seek out experiences or helping students find their people on campus or their interests.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
- Suggestions around requiring students to visit the Piper Center or complete various career preparation tasks throughout their time at St. Olaf.
  - “The career center needs to be more robust. I think there should be a required course on writing resumes, cover letters, and interview skills. Or at a minimum, a requirement that each student produce a resume and cover letter and meet with the career center five times a year. I had a steep learning curve in figuring out how to get a job after I graduated.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “When I was at school, there were course requirements to ensure you were exposed to a wide range of subjects. I think including some career-preparedness activities among those requirements would be helpful . . . Another idea would be to require a certain number of “career” activities per semester (similar to how music students must attend a few performances per semester.) These activities could include things like having a resume review at the Piper Center, attending a networking event, etc.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
- 45 (36%) brought up financial support, both in terms of making St. Olaf more affordable for students but especially teaching students financial literacy skills (e.g., filing taxes, budgeting, saving/investing, taking out/paying off loans, etc.).
  - “Honestly, give students more financial aid, grants, and scholarships. I would have been much better prepared for life and living on my own if I didn't have to spend so much time and money worrying, stressing, and paying off student loans . . . Advocate for better policies both at St. Olaf College and in the broader community of secondary education. It is my wish that no student

- should graduate with nearly \$30,000 of debt simply because they wanted an education.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
- “A senior seminar focused on some of the practical things about being an adult would be really cool. Such a class could focus on budgeting, evaluating benefits, investing, etc. These are things that I had access to through my parents, but that's not true of everyone. This is one way to specifically address gaps that exist due to class differences.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “LIFE SKILLS, specifically financial education. I made a lot of financial mistakes in the decade after graduating because I just didn't know . . . Financial literacy is a privilege not everyone has, but Olaf could level that playing field for current students.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “Personal finance education, education on how health insurance works, what benefits to look for with retirement, etc.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Personal finance education! I work in human resources and no one understands how their 401k works, what are good retirement goals, how to save and grow your money effectively, etc. This should be a mandatory course for all students!” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
- 35 (28%) recommended expanding ways to practice applying their learning in real-world settings such as access to internships (perhaps even requiring them), research, or on-campus work opportunities; building in more applied learning within classes and/or through expanded course offerings; or potentially partnering with companies to provide short-term project opportunities for students.
    - “building out a more robust paid internship relationships with companies and requiring internship or related job experience to graduate (I believe many other schools do something like this.)” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
    - “Making more positions available for student work! Getting to practice sticking to a schedule, writing regular reports, and showing up on time in a slightly more forgiving environment was great experience for coping with life after college.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
    - “More practical, skill-based courses to prepare you for today's jobs, like graphic design, UX design, content marketing . . . We don't have to abandon St. Olaf's classic academic programs, just expand them so people feel equipped to pursue jobs that actually pay enough for us to pay our loans.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
    - “Prioritize hireable skills in courses. I would have been less marketable on graduation had I not done student research and student work which both aligned to my field of choice.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
    - “Courses with an internship/project components to them where students work with outside companies on a project.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)

- 28 (22%) suggested help with other practical skills for living independently (e.g., finding housing, cooking, wellness, work-life balance).
  - “More exercise or wellness/mental health related classes! When I think about my every day, that’s what I wished I had more info about.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “More opportunities to learn about and experience the realities of finding housing, buying a home, managing personal finances, and living a healthy, balanced life-style.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “Sharing information about the benefits of living off campus and skills learned via that housing arrangement--paying rent, cooking, commuting, etc. I probably would have still lived on campus, but I felt really behind on some of those things when after graduation compared to other peers and could have benefitted from awareness of those things.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  
- 16 (13%) discussed the need for exposure to different perspectives, increasing the diversity of the student body (across different facets of identities and beliefs), or teaching students how to engage with others who hold different views.
  - “Ensuring exposure to differing viewpoints (whether political, economic, religious, etc) and consideration and ability to interact with others of different views.” (alum from the 5-year cohort)
  - “I think having more exposure to diversity and different viewpoints would have better prepared me for life after college. In my time at St. Olaf, a lot of us had grown up in sheltered households with one set of viewpoints. College is a great place to question those assumptions and viewpoints and get exposed to new diverse perspectives and experiences.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  - “increase diversity- the world is diverse in thought, economic status, background, etc. St.Olaf is very homogenous in terms of being predominantly rich white students with high means. This is fine, but it is not the reality of the world for most people and perhaps the people students will encounter after graduation.” (alum from the 10-year cohort)
  
- 12 (10%) shared other feedback that didn’t fit into any of the above themes, such as continuing to emphasize community on campus and the value of the liberal arts, providing mental health support for students, opinions that St. Olaf shouldn’t engage in political matters, and critical comments about particular programs or the way the college invests its money.

It’s important to note that some alumni used their response to reinforce things that they had experienced at St. Olaf (e.g., high-quality liberal arts education, mentoring from faculty



and staff), while some others made suggestions related to things the college already does or has implemented (e.g., fine arts-specific career support in the Piper Center). Since the survey respondents were alumni who graduated 5-10 years ago, their perspectives likely reflect a different experience of St. Olaf than the programs, initiatives, and structures that exist today, while still offering ideas for how these can continue to improve.