

Crafting Your Future Self

By David R. Anderson '74

ST. OLAF OFFERS ITS STUDENTS MANY OPPORTUNITIES. Obviously, these include opportunities for intellectual growth — not just exposure to new continents of knowledge but also increased sophistication and maturity in the processes of thinking itself. Opportunities abound in other areas as well: spiritual growth, athletics, recreation, music, travel, volunteerism, campus government, and social activities, to name a few. But perhaps the greatest opportunity of all is the chance for students to craft their future selves.

I BEGIN WITH AN ASSUMPTION: that despite their many accomplishments and talents, our eighteen to twenty-two year olds are not yet fully formed adults. If they were, four years at a residential college might not be the best investment of time and money for them and their families. But we know that for most of our students, college represents their first time living away from home for an extended period, with all of the opportunities for independent behavior and decision-making that experience represents. We know that the range and depth of ideas they will encounter will challenge and extend them. We know that the college years will result in a vast new network of acquaintanceships, friendships, and sometimes even romantic relationships, that will define students' adult years. Most students engage — consciously or unconsciously — in a process of vocational discernment in college that sets them on a path for their life's work. What happens to our students in college crucially affects who they will be for the rest of their lives. It's not a settled question when they arrive in the fall for new student orientation.

IF THIS IS THE CASE, then part of the work of students — and a subject of great interest both to their families who have enabled them to attend St. Olaf and to the faculty and staff who work with them — is to incorporate the experiences of their college years, along with those they brought with them to campus, into the person they will become as adults. I realize that it's not as though we all hit some stage in our development called “adulthood” and never change after that. We continue to grow and develop as we age in response to the people and events around us. Nevertheless, I think it's reasonable to say that there is a qualitative difference between life before and after independence, between school and work, between adolescence and what we call adulthood. It's that crucial transition from the one stage to the other that St. Olaf helps students to negotiate.

HOW DO WE DO THIS? Think of St. Olaf for a moment not as an educational institution but rather as a town of three thousand inhabitants who all happen to be eighteen to twenty-two years of age. This town has roads, streetlights, sewers, an electric grid, a power plant. We have homes and public buildings, including a library, a post office, a medical clinic, athletic fields, restaurants, concert halls, and churches. This town boasts a functioning city government. The citizens get up in the morning and go to work. When not at work, they perform the duties of citizens everywhere by attending to the governance of their town, they spend time at home with friends and family, and they make decisions about how to spend the balance of their leisure time.



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BUT A COLLEGE ISN'T EXACTLY like a town. All of the inhabitants are the same age and they all have the same “job”: to be students. Their “families” are their roommates. Their “neighborhood” is their residence hall. Their “restaurants” are Stav Hall, the Cage, and the Pause. Crucially, someone else, in most cases, is paying for all this. Their opportunities for self-determination are constrained by the faculty and staff who lay down certain rules about the inhabitants’ work and personal lives. And this is the only town I know of that is focused on the opposite of tourism: getting the inhabitants to go away after four years.

PERHAPS IT MAKES MORE SENSE to think of St. Olaf not as a town but as a complex, multifaceted laboratory where you can study what it would be like to live in a town. This laboratory offers students the chance to experiment with various approaches to the duties, responsibilities, choices, joys, and challenges of independent adult life in order to help them craft their future identity. An experiment enables you to test, under controlled conditions, something you haven’t tried before. If it doesn’t work, you can adjust the conditions and try again, or try something else. There is always a risk of failure with experiments, but the consequences of failure in this laboratory are not devastating. You can pick yourself up and try something else. This is what St. Olaf does: it offers students a safe place to experiment with versions of their future selves: their vocations, their avocations, the kind of citizens, neighbors, and friends they will be, the nature and extent of their ultimate commitments.

SOME STUDENTS ARRIVE as First Years with a clear idea of their intellectual interests. Most do not, and in any case, most college students change their major at least once. St. Olaf has one of the more robust general education programs among leading liberal arts colleges. We require students to gain exposure to the humanities, the social sciences, the sciences and mathematics, and the arts. We require courses that focus on oral expression, quantitative reasoning, and other peoples and cultures. We require study of a foreign language. This is the controlled part of the experiment. What we can’t control — and don’t seek to — is what will happen to students in these courses. Led by the curriculum into areas of knowledge and human experience previously unknown to them, students identify a passion for mathematics or dance or environmental science or Chinese language and culture or entrepreneurship, and over the course of four years as they advance in that subject, it becomes clearer and clearer to them how the knowledge they are gaining and the passion they are feeling can translate into life after college that both sustains them and pays the rent.

BUT FOR SOME STUDENTS, the path is not so direct. You start out thinking that you love chemistry but find the necessary course sequence too confining; meanwhile, your sociology course introduced you to a whole new way of understanding human behavior that appeals to your desire for rigorous analysis but focuses that analysis on an area that compels your attention. You begin to see a path forward for your working life. It’s one aspect of your future self, and it energizes you.

ONE COULD CONSTRUCT A SIMILAR NARRATIVE about any of the other aspects of a student’s experience at St. Olaf. Take faith as an example. You arrive as a First Year with some, or perhaps no, personal commitment to a faith life. You take a Bible course in your first year. You’re not accustomed to the kind of scholarly approach to this text. It unsettles you. One of your professors is speaking in chapel one day, and you go out of curiosity. You see your professor in a new light, and you reflect on your own faith practices. You attend the moving Friday service of morning prayer. You sing in a choir that contributes to a Sunday worship service in Boe Chapel. You are attracted to Selah, the praise service Sunday nights in the Pause, or to Vespers, the Wednesday night prayer service in Boe. You begin to form a notion of what your own faith life after college will be like, and you begin to model that future life in your present life on campus.

THE SAME THING HAPPENS in the other areas of your college life. What will be the nature and tenor of your relationships with family and friends? Daily interaction with your roommate and others in your residence hall will help determine that. What kind of citizen will you be in the city or town you move to after college? Your role in campus governance will help shape that. What will your politics be? Your courses, lectures by visitors to campus, and discussions outside of class will certainly shape your political philosophy. How will you spend your spare time after college? Did you develop a passion at St. Olaf for serious film? For Japanese anime? For fencing?

IN SOME LAB EXPERIMENTS there is only one correct answer: either your sample turns blue or it doesn’t. But in the laboratory I’m imagining, there’s a different outcome intended: purpose, direction, commitment, identity — and this outcome will be unique for each student at St. Olaf. What matters is that our students leave the College prepared by their experiences here — inside and outside the classroom — to take their place in the world as useful people leading lives of purpose. St. Olaf College is committed to creating the optimal laboratory for self-discovery for our students, and the results of their work — as reflected in the whole persons they become — is our greatest achievement. 🦋

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