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# An Analysis of Function, Structure, and Hierarchy in the Academic Department

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## Abstract

This study investigated the function and structure of academic departments and analyzed hierarchies among faculty members and departments at St. Olaf College, a small liberal arts school in the upper Midwest. In this paper, I analyze the structure of academic departments as units within a larger bureaucracy and apply Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital to the status of tenure, analyzing power relationships in the department as hierarchies based upon the possession or lack thereof of tenured status. The results of this study illuminate the power hierarchies present in the academic world and shed light on the exploitation of untenured faculty in colleges and universities across America.

# An Analysis of Structure, Function, and Hierarchy in the Academic Department

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*Discourse On Higher Education in the Popular Media*

In a recent New York Times article, Columbia professor Mark Taylor compared the current state of American higher education to the failed auto industries of Detroit, calling for a restructuring of American academia to adjust to the new challenges of the twenty-first century (2009). Although many academics may find the comparison to be an inflammatory one, this article is only one of many recent pieces in the popular press that have turned a critical eye to our colleges and universities.

In November 2007 a piece reporting on the decline of the tenure track made the front page of the New York Times, eliciting thousands of reader comments on the online edition (Finder:2007). In April 2009, President Obama himself spoke on the subject, citing the increasing demand and rising costs of a college education in the United States concurrent with the enormous student loan industry that has blossomed from these forces (2009). As the President stated, it seems that at a time in history when a college degree is becoming a necessity for entry into the broader work force, it is also at its most expensive. Over the past thirty years, tuition at private institutions has doubled while public university prices have tripled (U.S. Department of Education: 2005).

The U.S. Department of Education (2005) also estimates, however, that the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in colleges or universities has increased twenty percent since 1973. This student population has also become steadily more diverse with twenty percent more women, thirty percent more African-Americans, and three percent more Hispanics attending college.

Demographics of faculty members have also changed significantly in the past thirty years with the Education Department estimating that about 15 percent of U.S.

faculty in colleges and universities are minorities. They also estimate that almost half of college faculty members are Caucasian males, while 36 percent are Caucasian females. Overall, the number of faculty teaching at colleges and universities has doubled.

The nature of faculty appointments has also changed. The percentage of faculty considered “adjunct”—part or full time not on tenure-track—has increased from 43 percent in 1978 to an estimated 70 percent in both public and private institutions. College and university administration cite tightened budgets and a desire for hiring flexibility as important underlying factors in the move from predominantly tenured or tenure-tracked faculty to adjunct instructors. This change has elicited criticism from the American Federation of Teachers, among other groups, for systematically exploiting instructors and undermining the quality of education that students receive (Finder: 2007). As Dr. Ronald Ehrenberg, director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute states “[Adjuncts] don’t have the support that the tenure-track faculty have, in terms of offices, secretarial help and time. Their teaching loads are higher, and they have less time to focus on students” (1) Ehrenberg also notes the disillusionment that adjunct employees feel when compared to their tenure-track untenured counterparts, in whose future the college has actively invested in. Adjuncts feel no such investment from the college. He points out that without the prospect of tenure on the horizon, many feel temporary and expendable to their institutions.

Amidst the public discourse that surrounds these topics, this ethnography seeks to shed light on college and university education as it becomes a possibility and priority for a widening group of people. Within the specific context of St. Olaf College, I

investigated that most basic unit of the American higher educational system: the academic department. In this ethnography I analyze the characteristics of the department as a social structure, describing and analyzing the functions, organization, hierarchy, and practices of departments as well as faculty perceptions from within them.

### *Towards a Theoretical Orientation Part I: Structure*

When approaching this research, an initial question came to mind: How do I analyze the department? This question expanded to many more. What theoretical framework should I use? Which theorist will best capture the social reality of the individuals working in a department? How do I capture the broader context of the college as a whole? What theory of power should I use to describe the hierarchies in the department and college? How will I fit all this information into a readable narrative? How should I organize it? Finally, a more desperate question: Where do I begin?!

So I decided to start with that most basic of analytic tools: the question.

#### *How do I analyze the department?*

As I considered the testimonies of my participants and my own observations of the department, the concept of structure and agency continually appeared as a useful framework through which to view the social reality of the department. Emile Durkheim (1895), the pioneer of sociological theory and forefather of structural analysis, discusses structure in terms of *social norms*, which he describes as structured ways of thinking, acting, and feeling, external to individuals, which exercise coercive power over them. According to Durkheim, these social norms have a real and felt power over the individual's possible social actions. Weber (1922) elaborated on this concept further by

emphasizing the meaning that individual social actors attributed to their actions. He advocated for a sociology that took the meanings and experiences of subjective actors seriously. Weber discusses *agency*, an individual's faculty for social action, in a more explicit way than Durkheim, stressing the need for an interpretative sociology to study the actions and meanings of individuals.

From the work of these two theorists, the concepts of structure and agency have grown into one of the most important and debated subjects in sociology. In my research, participants tended to characterize their experiences of social structure and agency as two opposing forces, which influenced each other in dynamic ways. Although the actions of participants were constrained by the structures within which they worked, such as colleges and departments, they were not social "cogs," but agents that responded to the coercion of social structures in different ways. Depending on the context of their social actions, the balance of power between social structure and agency shifted in different ways, but, in the end, participants seemed to express the sentiment that social structures were the ultimate "winners" in the power struggle. Their social actions were inevitably constrained and shaped by the structures around them. In the context of this study, I address specifically the academic department itself as a powerful social structure primarily populated and formed by the social agents that are the focus of my research: professors.

Another related question thus arises:

*How then do we analyze the department as a social structure?*

Some of the basic principles of structural functionalist theory are useful in finding a practical answer to this question. The work of Parsons (1937), which analyzes society as an organism with many ordered and interrelated parts that work together to preserve the whole, is particularly useful in understanding the inner workings of institutions of higher education. He describes society as a large construct containing many smaller structures (like organs, tissues, cells, etc) that are bounded in their own right, but also part of the larger societal structure. Shared societal norms and values are the foundation of these structures.

Robert Birnbaum (1988) in his book *How Colleges Work* uses these basic theoretical concepts to analyze colleges and departments as a specific kind of structure: a bureaucracy. His ideas about bureaucracy are based upon the work of Weber (1922), who names several characteristics unique to these structures. Strict and systematic hierarchies of authority. The proliferation of written documents. Separation between the public domain of the bureaucracy and the private life. Differentiation and specialization of fields. Formal rules and guidelines, which informally manage activities in a bureaucracy. These are some of the most recognizable characteristics of the bureaucracy.

In his book, Birnbaum finds that institutions of higher learning and the structures within them demonstrate many of these characteristics. Colleges and universities are complex systems composed of various interrelated parts, such as administration, faculty, students, and staff. Within each of these sub-structures, even more specialized structures are formed. Birnbaum states that academic departments are one example of these specialized categories, which, as we continue to look closer, also have internal categories and hierarchies that exist within themselves, such as department chairs positions,

committees, and specific areas of specialization within the discipline. The influence of structural functionalist thought becomes clear as Birnbaum's concept of higher education takes on the form of a large organism with many interrelated parts.

Birnbaum also describes how the characteristics and function of authority is unique in the bureaucratic model. As he states, "The distinctive value of the bureaucracy is that administrators need not do all the work of the institution themselves. They may empower others do it through the concept of delegation of authority" (110). Thus, colleges and departments have become composed of countless committees and positions which take this authority and continue to delegate it. At the level of a department, this phenomenon has become most evident in the evolution of the position of department chair, which I will discuss more thoroughly later. He suggests that within a bureaucratic model, power, although centralized within a larger system, has been more equally distributed amongst these various specialized positions. As many of my participants related, however, this power on a smaller level, within departments and individuals, is inevitably limited by the broader structures and hierarchy of the institutions which ultimately grant control of resources and final decision-making power to a few. Thus, the original conflict of structure and agency reappears within the context of the academic bureaucracy.

### *Methodology*

My research was performed in the spring of 2009 at St. Olaf College, in conjunction with Sociology/Anthropology 373: Ethnographic Research Methods. Although my choice to use qualitative data, obtained through one-on-one, private interviews with faculty and students, was ultimately determined by the nature of the

research course, other aspects of qualitative research fit the demands of my project well. In particular, when investigating the concrete functions and effects of institutions, perceptions from the individuals that ultimately make up the institution and function within it are useful and necessary for a full understanding of how it works. In the interview format, I was able to collect detailed and specific data about individuals that I would not be able to obtain from a questionnaire or other quantitative format.

The sample-size and limited generalizability of the results are the main weaknesses of the methodology used in this ethnography. Because of time-constraints, I was only able to interview ten faculty members and five students. Although the participants were chosen from a variety of disciplines and were specifically picked to account for a variety of perspectives within the faculty population, they were not randomly selected or statistically representative of the larger St. Olaf faculty population. The sample does include full, associate, and assistant professors, as well as department chairs, program directors, and adjunct instructors, in total representing each of the faculties. The small-sample size and non-random sampling technique, however, limits the generalizability of the results of this study.

### *The Setting*

St. Olaf College is a small liberal arts school situated on a picturesque hill in the small town of Northfield, MN, a forty-five minute drive south of Minneapolis. The college is relatively small with an enrollment of 3,073 students in 2008 (45 percent men, 55 percent women), and shares many of the typical traits of private liberal arts colleges: a residential campus, small class sizes, high-achieving, upper-middle class white students, small faculty/student ratios, numerous liberal arts-based majors, and a prominent church

affiliation (St. Olaf College Fast Facts: 2009). The campus is fit with all the idyllic trappings of a small liberal arts college: rolling green lawns sprinkled with statues, neo-gothic monoliths of limestone buttressed with thick woods, Old Main propped high upon the hill, looking down upon a scenic small town.

Two-hundred-thirty seven faculty members work amid this carefully maintained environment (St. Olaf College Office of Institutional Research: 2008) Sixty-two percent of them are full-time professors with tenure. The other thirty-eight percent of faculty members fall into a variety of categories including part-time, full-time, tenure-track, adjunct, and others. They are organized into five faculties: Humanities, Social and Applied Sciences, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Fine Arts, and Interdisciplinary and General Studies which house the various academic departments at the school. Of these faculties, Natural Sciences and Mathematics has the most majors and professors, with Humanities as a close second. The Interdisciplinary and General Studies, however, encompasses the most departments, followed by the Humanities and Natural Sciences and Mathematics, respectively. Overall, the faculty and students are spread fairly evenly throughout the faculties, although the Natural Sciences and Humanities have a definitively larger population.

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## **Looking at Function: The Department as a Home**

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“What do we do? I would say that ultimately we teach. We provide a space and organization for the teaching of our discipline. That is our ultimate task, although there are many others.”

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### *A Home for Teaching*

This answer, put forth to me by a member of a larger department in the Humanities faculty is characteristic of the answers I received to that initial question: What do departments do? Teaching was at the core of every participant’s ideas about what the function and job of a department. For all of the participants, most of their days are spent teaching or preparing to teach. The department serves as a place, both in a spatial and abstract sense, for them to prepare and perform that ultimate job.

In the context of the broader organization of St. Olaf College, the department is also part of a larger organization, with its own goals and functions. These goals are in some ways congruous with the goals expressed by the individuals in the department:

teaching, scholarship, and service. As the mission statement states:

Now in its second century, St. Olaf College remains dedicated to the high standards set by its Norwegian immigrant founders. In the spirit of free inquiry and free expression, it offers a distinctive environment that integrates teaching, scholarship, creative activity, and opportunities for encounter with the Christian Gospel and God's call to faith. (St. Olaf College Mission Statement: 1987:1)

However, it is important to note that St. Olaf College is also a private business. On a functional level, it provides a service (higher education, residence, the “college

experience”) for paying customers (students). As many researchers, academics, and culture critics have noticed, in the context of a recession and rising tuition rates, the private liberal arts college is increasingly turning to marketing and brand development to attract students (Kirp 2004; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Litten 1980). St. Olaf is no exception. The recent creation of the Office of College Advancement, public relations programs such as Black and Gold Corps (a hand-picked group of students who attend public events to provide a positive “face” for the St. Olaf student body), and an increasing budget for marketing and promotional materials are just a few examples of the college’s emphasis on its promotion as a product (St. Olaf College Annual Report 2007-2009). As organizations within the structure of the college, departments are inevitably tied to this market function as organizations that provide services for the students whose tuition dollars pay their salaries and provide the monetary base for their resources.

#### *A Home for a Discipline*

One of the most important functions of the department for many of my participants was that it united a specialization and a specific discipline under one organization. The department chair facilitates decision-making, curriculum choices, and collaboration from the viewpoint of the specific discipline faculty was a part of. For the larger departments that housed a variety of sub-disciplines and perspectives, this function of the department was at times problematic. Members of larger departments often stated that disciplinary “cliques” existed. Collaboration existed within these groups, but not outside of them. As one participant stated, “My colleague and I collaborate and talk because we study similar things, but I don’t really have a lot in common with other members of the department because we don’t study the same things.” Decision-making

within these larger group was often more difficult because so many diverse perspective and priorities were represented under one department.

Within smaller departments, the general sentiment that, “We all pretty much agree” was expressed by many. Collaboration also seemed to occur across the entire department rather than between small groups of individuals, although almost every participant did express dissatisfaction with the amount of collaboration occurring in departments. Many cited time constraints as a key influence on intra-disciplinary collaboration

#### *A Home For Students*

Outside of providing a disciplinary home for professors, the department performs a myriad of other functions. It is also the disciplinary home for its student majors, and in its classrooms, offices, and lounges, the place where faculty and students interact. Many participants, however, expressed dissatisfaction with the relationships they had with students, stating that they wished they knew and interacted with their majors more. The level of satisfaction or lack thereof was highly contingent on the size of the department. Members of larger departments expressed frustration that they were simply unable to personally get to know all of the majors. In these departments, often faculty would know a few students closely, through multiple classes, research, independent projects, and other venues. In smaller departments, however, faculty seemed more satisfied with their knowledge of their majors. Many expressed that although they wished they knew their majors better, they felt that the department had a fairly close relationship with their students. Smaller class sizes and a smaller number of classes in general, allowed them to get to know many students well.

*A Home for Space*

Departments also on a basic level provide a physical space to house faculty and their daily tasks. The characteristics and role of space differed greatly between the departments I observed and sampled from. Many of my participants agreed that ideal department space would be similar to the offices housed in Holland Hall. One particular department was considered the exemplar of collective space, with a large student lounge attached to an even larger faculty gathering space that functioned much like a courtyard with peripheral offices opening into it. In this particular department, physical space was viewed as an essential component of the functions of the department.

Most of my participants, however, were not so satisfied with their physical space and viewed it as a handicap to their functioning. Members of one particular department, whose physical space consisted of a hallway with a series of offices, expressed dissatisfaction with the collective space and said it influenced the social cohesion and functioning of the department in a negative way. The student major that I interviewed from this department similarly expressed dissatisfaction with the space, wishing for the “the mansion that the Philosophy department has.”

## Looking at Structure: The Department as Bureaucracy

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*“The model of the department has changed. It used to be a lot of white men with wives at home taking care of the kids. Now we have two career families, commuters, and everyone in between, so of course the structure has changed.”*

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### *Things Have Changed: Structure Then and Now*

“Things have changed.” I heard this statement again and again when addressing the topic of department structure. Amongst my participants, there was a consensus that the structure of the present was quite different from the structure of the past.

The department of the past was characterized by my participants as “good old boys” clubs where a powerful male department chair ruled over a fairly homogenous faculty of white men. Faculty were expected to come to meetings, social functions, and other events, and as one of my participants noted, “At meetings, role was taken religiously. You were expected to come, and you couldn’t be late.” Because these men usually had a wife at home to take of domestic duties, time for gatherings, both formal and informal was more ample. Professors reminisced about the days when they would eat lunch on the lawn with their students or have them over for dinner at their home. Faculty weekend retreats were held more often. Students called professors at home. Professors lived in Northfield and walked ten minutes to school every morning. There

was a palpable sense of nostalgia in many of my participant's memories of those "simpler" years.

Participants linked most of the changes evident in departments today to social movements of the late twentieth century and the advent of the two-career family. Faculty now represent a diverse array of races, genders, and sexual orientations. They no longer exclusively live in Northfield either. Faculty members with working spouses find themselves commuting to work from homes in the Twin Cities area, where their spouses are able to get jobs and affordable housing. Days were filled with a myriad of new tasks inherited from the "housewife": picking up children from daycare, running to the grocery store, taking the kids to piano lessons, making dinner, and commuting an hour the next morning. According to my participants, time is a premium in today's academic environment. The leisurely afternoon discussions and evening faculty meetings are replaced by days and nights filled with obligations.

Participants also noted broader structural changes to departments, most commonly citing the evolving role of department chair. They noted that in the past the department chair was a coveted position of power. Department chairs wielded considerable decision-making power in the department. As one faculty member stated, remembering a department chair of the past,

He made many major decisions on his own. Back then, the department chair decided on things and that was that. There wasn't nearly as much negotiation or discussion as there is now. Now the job is essentially one of a negotiator and bureaucratic liaison. Nobody wants it. There's so much extra work without any power or incentives.

The authoritarian structure has changed to a structure that is more democratic and flexible. Departments no longer can demand that their faculty attend every faculty meeting on time, participate in weekend retreats, or be constantly available to colleagues and students. Faculty have new commitments, new family roles, and new concerns. They can no longer be expected to adhere to a strict authoritarian structure that does not allow for debate in the context of a work force representing diverse backgrounds, attitudes, and experiences. According to my participants, the “good old boys” model is obsolete.

### *Structural Patterns of Today*

The structure of departments at St. Olaf today is by no means uniform. The various departments that I observed had a diverse range of practices and styles, but in all of them, I noted that a pattern of vertical hierarchy appeared.

At the top of this hierarchy is the department chair (or, in the case of the music department, two chairs), as I mentioned before, an appointed leader of the department who serves as the direct liaison between the department and the larger college bureaucracy. The department chair has power to make appointments and certain decisions about curriculum, department practices (such as meetings, etc), tenure review, and other miscellaneous issues that come up throughout the year. In most cases, the chair does not make the decisions about these topics as much as perform the necessary paperwork to allow practices to happen or facilitate discussion amongst the department faculty to come to a consensus. Compiling the materials for tenure review, for example, was often mentioned in interviews as a prime example of typical chair duties. This task requires time spent gathering recommendations, writing reviews, and compiling all this paperwork into one larger portfolio. The process itself is not perceived as facilitating any direct

use of power. To those involved, it is just another “bureaucratic task” that requires a lot of paper work and attention to the details of college policy. Although some participants did acknowledge that tasks such as these imply an inherent power over their colleagues, in practice, that power is not really perceived. To many department chairs, these tasks are not demonstrations of authority, but rather, hours of unpleasant busywork.

The remaining faculty of the department are organized according one’s position as Full, Associate, or Assistant professor (tenured or on tenure-track) or Instructor (non-tenure track) (St. Olaf College Faculty Handbook: 2009). Professors receive greater salaries and often more decision-making abilities than Instructors. As one interviewee stated, “On most department issues, we all vote on a decision, regardless of position, but for important issues, only the tenured faculty vote. And then for *really* important issues, only full professors vote.” Outside of these formalized hierarchies, more informal power relationships exist as well, which I will elaborate on later. Each member of the department is required to perform various duties within the department, and the specifics of these duties are usually established informally. As I mentioned earlier, participants stated that the faculty positions carry expectations to participate in committees, projects, and department meetings although compared to practices of previous years, the expectations are not as strictly enforced. Most of my participants did emphasize that the decision-making process was fairly horizontal in nature. All faculty had a vote in most departmental issues and decisions were often made on an informal basis, particularly in the smaller departments with less diversity of opinion. Many of them characterized their departments as democratic in structure.

I will again turn to Robert Birnbaum's (1988) analysis of academic structures to further analyze some of my observations from the field. The vertical structure of departments and the larger college fit into his model of the bureaucratic academic institution, which consists of a series of ranked subunits (departments, offices, etc) within a larger structure. Although the department itself is not as formally structured as the college at large, it nonetheless has some of the same structural qualities, including formalized hierarchies and rules. As Birnbaum states, "Individuals know what their jobs are, and they understand limits of their own responsibilities and those of others" (106). Policy books such as the Faculty Handbook set forth this formal division of labor. Department functions are also largely dependent on written documents, such as e-mails, which were mentioned by all my participants as a significant "drain" of their time and attention throughout their workdays. This use of written documents is cited by Weber (1922) as one of the most notable features of bureaucratic structure. The larger the departments, the more pronounced these bureaucratic features appear. Large departments such as Music and Biology have numerous levels of administration and areas of specialization within the major. In smaller departments, the structure is generally more horizontal and specialization is less pronounced. Although faculty have various roles to fill in the department, participants reported that the structure was more flexible and less stratified.

Within the context of the larger bureaucracy of the college, all of my participants stated that on a daily basis the administration and the broader influence of the college structure was nearly invisible in their offices and classrooms. Faculty reported feeling fairly autonomous within their classrooms and offices. They do not have, as one faculty

member stated, "...colleagues and administration breathing down our backs in the classroom. In a lot of ways, we do pretty much what we want on a daily basis." However, many participants also recognized that their agency both as a professor in a department and as a department within a college is limited by structure. Yes, on a daily basis within their classrooms and offices professors are not micro-managed. They have flexible hours, power over their classrooms, and a role in the decision making process of the organization. Nonetheless, they are constrained by the rule books, expectations, and resources of the department and college.

Broader structural restraints imposed on the department as a whole were more evident to participants, particularly to those who had tried to make broader changes in the college. As one faculty member observed about her own department "Yes, we have a positive relationship with the administration, but we're also not doing anything they don't want us to do. We're not making any change." A faculty member from one particular department that had unsuccessfully suggested broader changes to the college curriculum directly related her experience to the concepts of structure and agency. Her department had an inherently limited amount of control over their own resources within the bureaucratic system, so once they ran into administrative opposition to their suggestions for change, they no longer had any real power. At the top of the bureaucratic ladder, the administration had control of the rules and resources of the college. Her recent experiences with the administration demonstrated that departments are ultimately limited by the broader structure within which they operate.

## Looking at Power: Hierarchy and Symbolic Capital in the Department

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“I’m tempted to say that academia is as hierarchical as the military, if not more so.”

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### *Towards a Theoretical Orientation Part II: Power*

The subject of power was a polarizing one for my participants. Hierarchy. Exploitation. Dominance. These were uncomfortable subjects for some, mildly disconcerting for others, and a welcome opportunity to speak up for many.

In the social sciences, power, like structure and agency, has also been the subject of much debate and theory. I have already addressed power in terms of structure and its powers of coercion on departments and individuals within this paper, but to frame a subject that was so important to my participants, I wanted to utilize a more specific theory to look closely at power within the department.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital was particularly useful in analyzing the experiences of my participants. As he states in his book *Distinction* (1979), symbolic capital refers to the resources available to an individual on the basis of prestige, honor, or recognition. The systems of symbolic capital in societies are determined by social norms and values that endow honor on those who possess certain qualities or positions in society. Within this paper, I analyze tenure as a form of symbolic capital that determines one’s position in the hierarchy of the department. I also analyze hierarchies of symbolic

capitol among departments in the broader context of the college. Issues of power in these two contexts occupied the bulk of my discussions with participants. They were the subjects that provoked strong opinions from all.

### *Tenure as Symbolic Capital*

One of my participants described tenure as, “The gold at the end of the graduate school rainbow.” Another participant reiterated the more cynical observation of a colleague, who compared getting tenure to “winning a shit-eating contest.”

Tenure.

That coveted guarantee of employment and job security that transcends all but gross misconduct. According to many of my tenured participants, the process of “getting” it was by far the most stressful period of time in their career, requiring intense review and judgment, both formally and informally. As one faculty member stated, “Yes, you have to kiss a lot of ass along the way.” One of my participants even cited the testimony of a local doctor, who apparently is able to tell whether a patient is on tenure-review or not because of the deteriorating state of their health. It is this status that defines hierarchy and power relations in the academic world.

As I mentioned earlier, the higher status of tenured professors has been institutionalized within the structure of the department. They can vote in the most important decisions. They have higher wages. They have benefits and job security that adjunct faculty do not have. These formal benefits of the tenure status that establish the hierarchy of the department were mentioned by many of my participants. Through a Bourdieuan lens, tenure can be seen as status endowed with symbolic capital. It is a

position that in the academic world is associated with academic legitimacy, seniority, and freedom. The academic environment endows tenure with this meaning and status. The status of tenure as a form of symbolic capital has been written into the rules of institutions and was first created by the formal codes which established its existence. This status has been maintained not only by the benefits established in these codes, but also by the symbolic capital that it subsequently carries with it. In this cyclical manner, the symbolic capital endowed upon the tenure status upholds and is also upheld by the formal academic rules that originally established it.

Thus, the status of tenure not only gives people all the trappings of symbolic capital that I have already mentioned (academic authority, legitimacy, seniority), but it also endows individuals with formalized autonomy and power within the larger structure of the college. As one participant stated, “You have to *really* mess up to get fired. Tenure protects you from your bosses.” To use structural analysis, getting tenure is like getting an “extra dose” of agency. You have guaranteed job security.

Those who do not have tenure do not have the same degree of autonomy. As one participant noted, “If you don’t have tenure, you’re pretty powerless. You don’t get many benefits, and you don’t have job security. This obviously impairs your freedom to express your opinion or take risks in the work place.” Without the symbolic capital of tenure, untenured faculty, and particularly those not on the tenure-track, have far less agency within the department and college. Several non-tenured faculty members believed that this hierarchy based on tenure hindered the functions of the department as a whole. One adjunct faculty member stated that, for example, the curriculum needed to be updated in his department, and it had not gotten done because the newer faculty members

with knowledge of the latest trends in the fields were adjuncts. Because they received no power or benefits from the department, they did not feel the need to devote any extra time to it. As he stated, “Why work even harder for a system that doesn’t give you anything in the first place?”

*Looking At Untenured Faculty: Informal and Formal Manifestations of Hierarchy*

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“I would say that the department is like a caste system. It’s not just about the official policies. It’s the informal things that matter too. The feeling that you’re not respected as an academic. That you are an outsider.”

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As I mentioned in my introduction, the subject of academic hierarchy and its effects on non-tenured faculty has attracted much debate in the academic world and popular media as colleges continue to hire more non-tenure track faculty. How does this new hiring development affect colleges, students, faculty? This subject was one of surprising consensus in my sample, so I would now like to focus on the experiences of non-tenured faculty to further illustrate the manifestations and effects of the tenure hierarchy that were so evident to many of my participants.

When asked if power hierarchies existed in their departments, all my participants answered affirmatively. Although responses varied in directness, across the various

positions and disciplines that my sample covered, each person nonetheless expressed that hierarchies largely based on tenure status did exist. Participant' perceptions of the severity of that hierarchy did not appear to be affected so much by positioning in the system as by personal attitudes towards their job and the college. I encountered department chairs and long-time tenured faculty that emphasized the powerlessness and exploitation of adjunct faculty. I also encountered adjuncts that described academic hierarchies in a generally more positive way. The variation I observed seemed to be due more to broader personal attitudes (negative or positive) about the college and department that appeared throughout the interview. Personal histories and experiences that I did not have time to investigate could also have been a part of this equation.

Beyond the institutionalized aspects of hierarchy, such as salary, benefits, and job security that I mentioned earlier, participants also described the informal manifestations that occurred amongst their colleagues on a daily basis. Many non-tenured faculty reported feeling like outsiders that had to work harder to earn the respect of their colleagues and legitimacy as an academic. As one adjunct said, "Some senior faculty seem to think that if they drop a ball, you'll pick it up for them."

Some non-tenured faculty also reported feeling unspoken pressures to please tenured faculty. Particularly those untenured faculty on tenure review felt that they had to, as one person put it, "Kiss ass to get ahead, play the game, shut up at the appropriate times." Many tenured faculty corroborated this observation, reporting that untenured faculty were generally much quieter in meetings and careful about their opinions. As one department chair put it, "New faculty don't say much in meetings, and quite frankly, I'd advise them not to." Those that lack the symbolic capital of tenure are less able to express

their opinions readily. As individuals at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, many feel like outsiders and are limited by the structure that surrounds them. Those non-tenured faculty who are on the tenure-track spend much of their time and energy in pursuit of that status which will push them higher on the ladder, thus sustaining that cycle of hierarchy and power which marginalizes them.

Those faculty who do not have the possibility of getting tenure at all are nonetheless forced into the working for lower wages and benefits because at a basic level, many of them need a pay check, however minimal it may be. Many of these individuals stated that their own attitudes about teaching, academia and their disciplines were negatively affected by the conditions of their lower status. Some shared stories of friends who felt demoralized by the system, who no longer cared about their teaching or discipline because they were so frustrated by continually moving from low-paying job to low-paying job without the prospect of tenure. One tenured professor's comment on the broader context of the academic power structure particularly struck me because it articulated the contradictions that many adjunct faculty seemed to struggle with in their own lives:

I guess within the context of all the oppression of this world, the problems of adjunct faculty within academia seem insignificant. Nonetheless, it seems ironic that within a culture of academics that pride themselves so much on fairness and tolerance, such exploitation exists, an exploitation that we are all complicit in.

As he states, the high ideals of the academic world conflict with the everyday experiences of adjunct faculty. The frustrations expressed by many adjunct faculty seemed to reflect Durkheim's concept of anomie (1897), a feeling of normlessness and disillusion when the values of an ideology are inconsistent with individual's experiences

in everyday life. The ethics and ideology of the academic world are inconsistent with the exploitation that individuals experience on a daily basis. In both the informal and formal manifestations of the tenure power hierarchy, many adjunct faculty feel exploited by structures such as the department that are supposed to be their academic home.

*Looking At Inter-Departmental Hierarchies of Power*

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“Is there a hierarchy of disciplines at St. Olaf? [Laughter] Yes, of course.”

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Across my sample, there was also a surprising consensus that a hierarchy of departments existed on campus. Biology and Music were most often cited as the “giants” among departments. According to my participants, they received the most resources and carried the most prestige. “Look around,” one participant told me. His comment spurred me to do just that. The renovated chapel. The new science center. The “modular village.” As one student stated, commenting on the relocation of certain departments to the Modular Village during the construction of the new science center, “You want to talk about marginalization? Look at the Education department. We’re in a trailer park while they fix up the science departments’ crappy old building for us. That’s just great.” To many of my participants, the hierarchy among disciplines was a reality, evident most concretely in the spaces around them.

The concept of symbolic capital is also useful in analyzing this hierarchy of departments observed at St. Olaf. The disciplines that my participants cited as at the top of the hierarchy are also those that appear to be those disciplines valued highly by

broader American society, according to recent research (Evans 1995; Wright 2006). These disciplines and the departments they encompass carry the symbolic capital bestowed upon them by society.

In the context of a private liberal arts college, the symbolic capital of certain disciplines is also related to economic capital, or money. Those departments that will attract the most students and, thus, tuition dollars, also receive more resources and higher status. Much as the status of tenure is maintained in a cyclical way, the symbolic capital of certain disciplines both creates and is created by the resources that they receive from the college. To give a specific example, the Music department receives a relatively large portion of resources from the college, compared to other departments (St. Olaf College Annual Report: 2009). These resources in turn enable the department to continue thriving and attracting new and talented students, thus maintaining its reputation amongst the college and the world. The cyclical maintenance of status and symbolic capital is thus apparent.

Participants from departments in the Social and Applied Sciences and Interdisciplinary and General Studies expressed the most dissatisfaction with the hierarchy. Members of these departments felt marginalized within the college and amongst their peers. Faculty in the Interdisciplinary and General Studies felt that their disciplines weren't considered legitimate by other departments. They perceived a skepticism and fear from colleagues because the very existence of their very existence challenged the legitimacy of disciplinary boundaries and specialties.

Social and Applied Science faculty felt that the importance of their discipline was overshadowed by the status of the natural sciences. They struggle to gain the resources to

hire new faculty and offer more classes. Several were frustrated with the current state of their curriculum. They want newer and more varied class selection, but they do not have enough faculty to enact those changes. The disciplinary hierarchy seemed most present and felt in the observations of these faculty members. In their experiences, symbolic power is at work both within departments and between them.

### **Conclusion**

Power. Structure. Higher Education. I discovered during my research that these were all subjects which people at St. Olaf wanted to talk about. Faculty and students alike were eager to share an opinion about how the institution they live within works, in both negative and positive ways. The subjects I discuss here are only a few of the many topics that emerged throughout my research from this enthusiasm

As I wrote this paper, I struggled to pinpoint the most important patterns in my interviews because there were so many. In the end, I focused on those topics which I thought would be most common to the experience of faculty at St. Olaf. These also turned out to be the most provocative: structure, tenure, and hierarchies of power. These topics, which so much discussion and consensus centered around, are important and need to be addressed in any discussion of department life. In particular, I felt it was necessary to share the stories of those adjunct professors who, within the context of their workplaces, are not always heard; the accounts of these people are perhaps the most enlightening in this paper. The whispers, grumblings, and rumors that circulate any department at St. Olaf are expressed in a candid and concrete way here. I hope that this

paper opens up more space for conversation and understanding amongst members of departments to build a more effective and compassionate work environment.

### *Future Research*

Opportunities for future research from this study seem endless to me. At a time when so much of higher education is in flux, it is important to know what is going on in our institutions of learning. In light of my findings, the subject that I think particularly merits further study is the administration. As the figureheads and leaders of institutions, they are an important part of the broader picture of higher education and are often the individuals that shape its course. As people in positions of power, they are also the subjects of much generalization and complaint. Further study is needed to untangle the discourse surrounding the administration and the truth within and behind it.

Indeed, colleges and universities are at the intersection of much discourse, power, and knowledge within our society. Therefore, regardless of the specific direction of future research, I think that our institutions warrant a closer and more detailed look, particularly by those working within the system who have the tools to conduct this research. I hope that this paper encourages more critical research by both faculty and students to broaden the knowledge of ourselves and the institutions we inhabit.

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