

## **Building Community through Traditions: Demystifying Identity through Rituals**

Karin Christenson, Ryan Evans, Morgan Harden, and Audrey Webb

*Abstract: Socialization theory suggests that social norms and culture are implemented through social control. Control can come in the forms of rituals and traditions celebrated by a community such as a college. Because of the incredible impact college leaves on an individual, understanding how the culture of community is built illuminates the power of social control. Through interviews and focus groups, we better understand the power of traditions and rituals in building a sense of community on the St. Olaf campus. From alumni administrators to first-year students, a smattering of perspectives provides a wide range of understanding community. As a result, we have a better understanding of the power and use of traditions and rituals in building a cohesive, inclusive community.*

### Main Points:

- Framework of Identity: Institution Pre-Student
  - The St. Olaf Website
  - The Crafting of a Class in Community
  - Architecture's Role in Building Community
- Implementation of Identity: Institution Inter-Student
  - Administrative Inoculation
  - Administrative Group Formation
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### **Introduction**

When one embarks on their time in college, they enter a community for four years that has already been established as a community. Over time, that involvement in the community creates and shifts an individual's identity. "Identity" as a concept is complex and defined in many ways. How is community established and nurtured over time? How does community shape identity? Our research seeks to demystify the term community first by uncovering the infrastructure that supports and perpetuates community, and then by analyzing the formation and expression of identity at St. Olaf College.

In order to understand the concept of community, we first need a definition. Our upperclassmen focus group defined community as a group of people living together, sharing a common language, and understanding a common set of beliefs. One individual upperclassman defined community as "an interconnected group of individuals that depends on each other both consciously and subconsciously; sharing, to some degree, an established set of boundaries-- physical, ideological, moral--in order to distinguish themselves and create a level of exclusivity for those outside the community. However, these boundaries are dynamic over time and space,

always shifting and changing.” We want to know why and how the community is established, how it changes, and how it transcends time.

### **Methodology**

Our research focused on community- and identity-building at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN. From its brochure: “Founded in 1874 by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants, St. Olaf College is a nationally ranked liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America located in Northfield, MN. Northfield is a historic river town of 19,000 in the southeast part of Minnesota. Downtown Northfield, within walking distance of campus, has been restored to recall the 19th century and features coffeehouses, sandwich shops, restaurants, gift stores, and local art galleries. Known as “The Hill,” St. Olaf College’s picturesque 300-acre campus is home to 16 academic and administrative buildings, 29 student residents, and 10 athletic facilities. As a residential college, 96 percent of St. Olaf students reside in one of the 11 residence halls and 18 academic and special interest honor houses.” St. Olaf College paints itself as part of the active, small-town community found in Northfield, a description which calls to mind rolling hills, zigzagging streams, and an abundance of space in which to grow and explore.

As of Fall of last year, St. Olaf boasted 3,105 full-time students and 51 part-time students, consisting of 45% men and 55% women. White ethnicity overwhelms the campus at 84%, followed by Asian ethnicity at 5%, then Black, Hispanic, Multi-racial, and unknown ethnicity at 2%. From this population, we took our sample. We interviewed a total of 31 subjects: 4 administrators, and 27 students. We wanted to keep our sample as consistent as possible with St. Olaf’s demographics: of our 27 student subjects, 14 were male (44.4%), and

15 were female (55.5%); within our sample, we replicated the gender distinctions of the population as best we could. Unfortunately, due to time and population constraints, our sample didn't replicate the demographics of the population in terms of ethnicity--all of our subjects identified with a White ethnicity.

A considerable amount of our sample (48%) consisted of two student focus groups. Within our focus groups, we interviewed 6 underclassmen (1 first year, 5 sophomores) and 9 upperclassmen (4 juniors, 5 seniors). Outside our focus groups, we conducted twelve one-on-one student interviews with 4 first years, 2 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 3 seniors, for a total student subject rate of 5 first years, 7 sophomores, 7 juniors, and 8 seniors. We intentionally included more upperclassmen. Our research dealt largely with how identity is formed and *then changed over time*; upperclassmen, due to more time at St. Olaf, offered more information on this subject, and, foreseeing this, we accounted for it when selecting our sample.

Our administrative interviews we conducted as two-on-ones, with two of our team members for one administrator. We interviewed four administrators: Paula Carlson, Greg Kneser, Michael Kyle, and Pamela McDowell. Due to this selection, we gained useful insight to four unique aspects of St. Olaf community-building: from the Vice President, the Dean of Students, the Dean of Enrollment, and the Director of Residential Life, respectively. We gained insight to St. Olaf's role both "pre-student" and "inter-student" concerning community-building. By pre-student, we mean the preparations that St. Olaf makes for its students--such as architecture of the space, hiring faculty, admitting students, and so on. By inter-student, we mean the interaction between St. Olaf as an institution and its students, once they are present on campus--such as concerts, organizations, classes, events, and so on. Another term we'd like to define is "intra-institution." By this, we mean how St. Olaf students act within the framework

St. Olaf has constructed for them (pre-student) and St. Olaf's implementation of community-building (inter-student). We gain insight to the intra-student aspect of community-building by our one-on-one student interviews mentioned earlier.

To make these distinctions more clear: we analyzed St. Olaf community-building in three parts. The first is an analysis of how the institution *prepares for* its students: institution pre-student. The second is an analysis of how the institution *interacts with* its students: institution inter-student. The third is an analysis of how the student *interacts within, against, in cooperation with* both the pre-student and inter-student aspects of the institution's community-building: student intra-institution.

### **Problem**

To call community a problem would be false. At St. Olaf College, community is of paramount importance as it helps shape us as human beings. However, in wanting to reflect on our experiences at St. Olaf, we were interested in the "Ole" identity by taking a step back and looking at the larger structure of how identity is created. Over four years, there is a continual blurring of social groups. We have identified this shift in our own lives and wanted to figure out how that was achieved. It is easier for us as outgoing seniors to recognize this gray area, and we saw disconnects we wanted to fill in and answers to questions of identity formation that we wanted to analyze from the institution's perspective and the student-to-student interactions. We will soon be leaving campus and entering a world that is not as strong of a community as St. Olaf has proven to be. Therefore, we wanted to dissect the infrastructure of what makes community in order that we may implement that into our lives moving forward.

Initially we set out to look at traditions and rituals and how they contribute to the formation of community. After our focus groups, the idea of identity emerged as a result of community building that we hadn't thought of. While still focusing on the role of traditions and rituals, we refined our research to include specifically what the identity "Ole" is and how it grows into its definition as defined by several different people, from first years freshly exposed to the community's identity to faculty and alumni who have been entrenched in the community for years.

In one way, we are uncovering the theory of St. Olaf as a controlling institution on a hill developing individuals around a similar standard of identity called "Oleness" through a period of administrative inoculation that transitions into student-to-student initiation and finally results in the Ole consciousness as developed through a series of shared experiences. On the other hand, we are researching St. Olaf College as a cohesive community sharing time and space as traditions and rituals in order to cultivate an identity that binds people forever.

### **Literature Review**

There exists much research on community and community-building within higher education, first beginning with *Reexamining our Rituals* (Young 1999), which acts as a call to action. Young gives great importance to rituals as a way of researching higher education students and their communities, and declares a lack of such studies. In the same year, a specific study on Dartmouth bonfire rituals responded to Young's call (1999). Although many other researchers followed Young's and Lee's lead, two areas of interest have been left relatively untouched: 1) the institution's role vs. the students' role in creating community, and 2) the disparity between under- and upperclassmen views of undergraduate community. Despite these

gaps in the literature, we did find articles that shed light on how rituals act in a higher education community.

For instance, Magdola (2001) highlights the campus tour as a potential student's introduction to a specific community's discourse and values, and a possible disconnect between values purported by a ritual and the values actually held by a community. The culture of a higher educational institution is one of "organized anarchy" consisting of a larger community formed by broad values and many smaller communities (2005), and comments on the disconnect within such a community in general, writing that culture inherently is paradoxical, diverse, and contradictory. One study found does address the students' role in community-building, but only in a preemptive fashion. Lee (1999) observed that, when selecting a college, students not only consider the institutions educational benefits but its networking values, as well as its symbolic capital.

This framework of research not only gave us an ample foundation on which to begin, but also a direction. We wanted our contribution to address the gaps found in the literature. Our research sought to undertake how community is created within higher education institutions, what differences exist in how the institution and its students view their community and the contributions both parties make to it, and how, among students, this view shifts with the progression from lower- to upperclassmen.

## **Findings**

### **Framework of Identity: Institution Pre-Student**

The framework of the institution before students arrive on campus is a component of the structure-agency model that can explain how community is built through traditions and rituals.

This paper will later discuss the agentic responses to the structure, but it is important to focus on the structure of the college pre-student.

### ***The St. Olaf Website***

In determining the framework of identity and community as formed by the institution, the college's website offered many observational insights. As the first impression of the college to people near and far, the website establishes the identity of this community through photos and a mission statement. First, photos of spring flowers and fall leaves rotate across the top of the home page, giving hope that nice weather will always be around. In reality, winter dominates more than most of the time students are on campus, but very few winter scenes are displayed on the website. Photos of the St. Olaf choir, band, and orchestra make up a lot of the other photos. Classes held outside with engaged professors and laughing students. The photos demonstrate a set of values that St. Olaf wants to purport to the outside world. When you're here you will have classes outside in the nice, sunny weather.

The pictures found on its website highlight the college's acknowledgement of public and private space. The phenomenologist Erving Goffman used public and private space to address the individual within a larger community--an explanation of the difference in his actions when being watched, when performing and when he is in private. We think an application of public and private space to an institution rather than an individual is equally enlightening. To the public, the wider internet community--prospective students, parents of students, and so on--St. Olaf defines its image by the pictures selected for the website; these images form *the image* of St. Olaf for those not, or not yet, infused within its community. In actuality, there exists distinct differences between the public image of St. Olaf and its private, member-only community. Its mission statement acts as another insight into its member-only

community, a peephole for the public eye into St. Olaf College. This, too, only gives a peephole's scope: it shows to the public space what St. Olaf wants the public to see; St. Olaf, by its choices as to what to make public is, in effect, performing for the public--a performance that outsiders cannot count on to align with the college's private life.

The mission statement is easily found and is clear in its intent for the college community. A college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "committed to the liberal arts and rooted in the Christian Gospel", St. Olaf "fosters the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit". The Norwegian immigrant founders of the college set high standards still in place today, combining "academic excellence and theological literacy with a commitment to lifelong learning". "St. Olaf strives to be an inclusive community...stimulating critical thinking and heightening moral sensitivity" that creates "knowledgeable citizens of the world". Such buzz words on the website can include "College of the Church", instilling the value of what it means to align the college and its principles with those of the church. "A Global Perspective" indicates an importance of understanding diverse perspectives and engaging in the larger global community through travel, internships, and efforts here on campus. "Campus Sustainability" drives a whole-scale effort to live sustainably in a small community, eat sustainably through a cafeteria that buys locally and composts regularly, and learn sustainably in LEED Platinum buildings. "Music and Recordings" implies the 100-year tradition of an excellent musical heritage.

### ***The Crafting of a Class in Community***

Michael Kyle, Vice President and Dean of Enrollment, shared a unique story of how the framework of the institution was and still is deliberately established. St. Olaf intentionally chose to maintain its character and to take a specific academic path about 25-30 years ago.

“We weren’t going to be a fad college”, but rather a classic liberal arts college that culminates in a degree representing a shared set of academic experiences as seen in the long list of general education requirements every student will take. A 4-1-4 academic calendar provides opportunities for students to explore new experiences during an interim--traveling to Greece, taking Modern Elixirs, or Acoustics of Sound--classes they never would have taken otherwise. This contributes to community in that it creates the time and space and logistical opportunity for students to develop new communities.

How St. Olaf intentionally sets up the residential life on campus attests to the value and expectation of living in and with community. In terms of where you live, very few students are allowed to live off campus, therefore requiring everyone to live on campus, in a way forcing them into community. In terms of size, the occupancy of the resident halls limits the size of the community. In a small community, bonds can be stronger as you rely on one another, as you can come to know each other better, as you have the time and the space available to create the bonds of community. Aside from dorms, alternative housing creates a space even more conducive to community-building. Individuals living in close proximity, living life together, and sharing resources offers that shared experience that creates community. St. Olaf knew these were spaces necessary for community.

Similar to residential life requirements, everyone is required to have a board plan. Three-thousand students eating in one central cafeteria is a picture of community. Our student interviews elaborated on the intuitive comfort of being able to go into “The Caf” along and finding someone with which they can sit without any concern of imposition. Everyone knows everyone!

Because of the residential structure, few cars are allowed on campus. Logistically, there are few parking lots in which to park cars. Culturally, the college wanted to establish a framework where students couldn't easily leave campus to go home or up to the cities. Students also came from farther away than the surrounding area which made having cars at school geographically difficult. With this lack of transportation, the school must provide opportunities for college students to do on campus. Because of these shared and extra-curricular experiences, students come to know each other as more than mere acquaintances but good friends in community.

Another approach to the framework that the college molds is the demographics of the incoming classes. Who the admissions department admits to the college forms the profile of the student body which will become a part of the community. In 1970, the college looked a lot different than it does now. Then about 1-2% of the incoming class was multicultural. Now, the class of 2014 hails from 43 states, 14 countries, and 5 continents. There are 128 U.S. multicultural students making up nearly 15% of the class. Now, the male-to female ratio of college students has evened out to almost exactly 50-50. St. Olaf demographics and student profile have changed significantly over the past 130 years. This was intentional in that we value the unique experiences each student brings to the campus from their diverse backgrounds. A student we interviewed said that "community is there from the start because we attract a certain kind of person and then foster that persona" on campus.

### ***Architecture's Role in Community-Building***

One of the most significant ways a college can build community is through the use of architecture. In each of our interviews, a main component of community that emerged was that

of space. A shared space that is conducive to ample community engagement is essential in building community. The administration did an excellent job of creating this intimate space in several buildings on campus. Buntrock Commons is centrally located on campus so as to be the grand central station and one-stop spot for all a student needs. One central cafeteria where everyone has to eat. Wide hallways. Small tables. Lots of niches and alcoves to gather in small groups and chat or study or have an intimate conversation. The Pause Kitchen and Mane Stage serve as the night club where all the events on campus occur. Dean Kneser said that every administrator designed a different part of the building putting their own personal touch which can be seen around every corner.

Regents Hall of Natural Sciences and Mathematics was intentionally crafted to have vast open spaces for people to gather. A LEED Certified Green building, Regents stands as a symbol of what the college values: sustainability. Similarly, Tomson Hall--the newest building on campus--also has long, large hallways, several smaller rooms for people to gather in, and a metaphorical meaning in "The Main Street", the process of going through college from admissions to the career and internship center.

The tunnels that connect Boe Chapel to Buntrock Commons to Rolvaag Library serve as a metaphor of St. Olaf's nurturing of the mind (Rolvaag), body (Buntrock), and soul (Boe chapel). This intentional arrangement of these buildings to be easily accessible through tunnels indicates a value the college wants to focus on being the these three core aspects of humanity. These are places the college creates so as to provide space and time for building community.

In terms of what the institution's role should be in building community, one student said that it "shouldn't have a large role but rather create space for students to do the creating of community. This can include funding the time and space, encouraging the moments that create

community which in turn define who we are as a student body, our interests, and what we care about.” The traditions that the college institutes are included in this framework . They “mobilize people and physically put them in a place”. Another student said that “it’s what St. Olaf created that creates the community, not St. Olaf itself”. This means that while St. Olaf can create a website to portray the ideal Ole, admissions can accept a certain type of student to fit the profile, and the design of architecture can encourage the intimate moments of community, ultimately it is the people involved that create the bonds of community.

### **Implementation of Identity: Institution Inter-Student**

The Olaf identity is not something the administration envisions and then just spontaneously happens. Community is the vehicle that serves to transmit these values both vertically from administration to student and horizontally between peers. Both the administration and the students we talked to referred to two distinct aspect of community at St. Olaf, the broader on-campus Olaf community of friends, strangers, faculty, staff, and administration and the intimate interpersonal connections people establish during their time here. Essentially, the administration and the other students around each of us teach students how to be an Ole.

### ***Administrative Inoculation***

The process begins during Week One in what Dean Kneser terms the “inoculation period” in which the incoming class hears everything you’ll ever need to know about St. Olaf life in three days. Seminars include class mapping not just for the current semester but every semester hypothetically for the next four years, what to do in case of sexual assault, listings of every accomplishment achieved by all Oles past and present, and details as to where you can

and can't park the car you aren't even allowed to have as a first year. By Day Three, students know all the logistics and expectations behind what it is to be a successful Ole. But those are intended lessons, which quite frankly sometimes aren't successfully transmitted. What is unintended but internalized are the insane schedules students can only navigate by mapping out every activity to the minute and smiling at while shaking the hand of seven hundred strangers in Play Fair. By the end of Week One, students know what it means to be a busy, accomplished, perpetually friendly Ole.

St. Olaf, due to its institutional role, can be compared to what Erving Goffman calls a "total institution." In total institutions, the agency of its members dwindles as choices (such as when to eat, bathe, and soon) are decided for them; if a member shows agency through disobedience, punishment is swift and harsh, resulting in a lack of agency to avoid punishment. In this way, the total institution dissolves individual identity. Like the "inoculation period" mentioned by Dean Kneser, a total institution starts "breaking" its members immediately upon arrival, forcing them into a submissive status position by, in some cases, stripping its new members of clothing, violating their personal possessions, or altering their personal appearances (see: upon a recruit's arrival to boot camp, his head is shaved). St. Olaf is not a total institution; however, upon arrival the individual identity is placed as secondary by the college, and the collective identity of St. Olaf is spotlighted. St. Olaf as an institution sets a rigorous ideal for its students, an ideal, that if not met, can act as reason enough to expel a student from the institution.

While the college does present the ideal Ole as what we, as Oles, should emulate, the administration also recognizes the difficulties of asking students to maintain such a perfect image. Administrators talked about the challenges of presenting the St. Olaf ideal. Both Dean

Kneser and Pamela McDowell discuss the stringent expectations students have for each other and talk about their damaging effects to community. Dean Kneser told the story of a woman who, even many years after graduation, still experiences substantial debt due to the loan she took out above her means to live the stereotypical lifestyle during her time here.

Underclassmen talk of the hesitance they feel to call upperclassmen part of their social network because of the intimidation they feel. Upperclassmen talk about feeling “crushed by socialness,” speaking to the isolation of hard-to-meet expectations that come with having a broad social network. Pamela McDowell talks about the power of social expectations and wishes the community used them to improve each other. By withholding friendship, she argues, peers can change the irresponsible behavior of their peers in a way discipline by the administration never will.

### ***Administrative Group Formation***

To balance the power of this prevailing sense of “Oleness”, the administration is very intentional about facilitating intimate interpersonal connections right away. Both Dean Kneser and Pamela McDowell say that fundamentally their job is to ensure every student has at least two or three personal connections in response to the common student concern: “will I be accepted socially?” Many of the students we talked to mentioned how pivotal it is to establish “family ties,” “put down roots,” and have a group of “core people” among the people on-campus.

According to the administration, the college is very intentional about establishing these close connections. Residence Life is a particularly active facet of the mission to establish these tight-knit communities. Residence halls have their own programming and JCs and RAs facilitate community between a small group of students. Students meet with their academic advisers in

small group sessions, attended small first-class sessions, and register for small but active organizations at co-curricular fair. The trend continues past the first week of classes first year. Class sizes get smaller as students progress through their college careers and departments become more exclusive with events like the Sociology/Anthropology department picnic.

This niche-like approach to community on campus imprints upon student identity. “There are art kids and science kids” one student notes. The art kids create their spectacle and the chemists take pride in wearing their goggles around campus. And the English majors, “well, I don’t even really know about English majors; they’re so far away from me.” In this niche-specific community of St. Olaf we freely give labels and students begin to claim them as their own.

However involved the administration is in creating community on-campus, the community is run almost entirely by students after 5:00pm. Pamela McDowell says an important aspect of the St. Olaf community is that it is “self-sustaining, self-governed, and self-enforced.” Identity is transmitted through community development and cohesion, but likewise, the individuals of the community shape the way the Ole identity transforms and is perpetuated, both at a communal and an individual level.

### ***Building Social Capital***

Students we interviewed looked to their fellow students for guidance on how to be an Ole. One student recalls the achievement-based hierarchy found among students on campus starting from week one with Michael Kyle’s speech regarding the exceptionality of the incoming class. The smallness of the college perpetuates the hierarchy. One student noted the impressive nature of the students featured on the St. Olaf homepage, made even more

staggering by the fact that the featured students are the same ones drunk dancing in the St. John's basement on a Saturday night. Furthermore, the campus is small enough for prominent characters to rise to the forefront of campus life; students themselves perpetuate the hierarchy based on accomplishments. In this way, students at Saint Olaf build social capital during their time on campus.

The "need to impress" described by the interviewee mentioned earlier acts as a sort of social capital among St. Olaf students. When students arrive on campus social and economic capital cease to exist in some ways. No longer is status denoted by what sort of vehicle a student owns, or the size of home, or the neighborhood in which a student lives, and so on--all of these status signifiers are neutralized by the St. Olaf institution. Some signifiers remain present, such as fashion and dormroom decor, but most become obsolete: Oles are defined by St. Olaf, not a prior identity. Academic achievement--and public recognition for that achievement--stands in to replace the now-obsolete status signifiers and in many ways usurps the signifiers still utilized. Less importance is assigned to the clothes a student wears, to the size of television in his or her dorm room, while more is assigned to academic merit, and perhaps an appearance on the college's homepage. What's more is that creative or artistic pursuits, as well as athletic pursuits, all fall under the "academic umbrella," meaning that because students are defined by its college primarily as students, and secondarily as artists, athletes, and so on, that whatever lauding the college permits its students is first and foremost academic lauding.

The social capital found in academic achievement rings louder at St. Olaf College than at others higher education institutions due to the size of its student population. At colleges or universities with larger student populations, a picture and article of a fellow student's

achievements on the homepage holds much less value; within a larger student population the interaction between the lauded student and those not recognized is likely minimal. At St. Olaf, due in a large part to the pre-student planning on the part of the institution and to its relatively small student population, the lauded student most likely interacts with a majority of his or her peers.

### ***Expanding Ole Identity***

The students who have been here the longest have the most capital; seniors know the most about what it means to be an Ole. Upperclassmen teach underclassmen how to, in a sense, become replacement versions of themselves. The process is institutionalized—Junior Counselors (JC's) serve as exemplars of Ole identity to their first-year residents. One first year girl perceived her JCs to be the ideal “good Ole.” JC's and Residence Assistants (RA's) are trained in the interworkings of the institution. Residence Life training focuses on “the fish bowl effect,” admonishing students to remember that, as JC's, their lives are on constant display. Every action becomes one associated with their position as a member of Residence Life.

But the power of the St. Olaf identity is that it is not just wrapped up in a few exceptional or highlighted individuals. The same student who idolized her JC early on in her first year noted that, as her time at St. Olaf went on, she began to take social cues and identity formation from people in her peer group. Similarly a first year male noted the tone set by most of the upperclassmen (referring to sophomores, juniors, and seniors) on-campus in the first weeks of life at St. Olaf. Interacting with older students, he said, taught him to regard St. Olaf and the Oles that comprised the community as “fun.”

The conceptualization of Ole identity begins as a theoretical, abstract, and intimidating one (Michael Kyle's speech), transitions to a few respected individuals (JC's and homepage honorees) and settles in the broad atmosphere of the student body.

### ***Joining the Conversation***

Though initially taught by administration and faculty as to how to view the Ole identity, Oleness at its most organic level arises from and is contained within the student body, perpetuated by the daily conversation. Gossip can serve as an essential tool for broader community cohesion. One student mentioned the events of the club hockey game that entered the St. Olaf dialogue. Even people who don't interact on a daily basis can talk about the drama of the club hockey game months after the fact. Events, "like the weather...give you something to talk about." When a community talks together, it holds together.

The events most likely to enter into the student dialogue are the ones run and operated by students themselves. "The students need to be what's important and the central function of the event." And this is where social capital comes in again; the best attended events are those sponsored by clubs with socially well-connected members. One student gives the example of multi-cultural events which are, in her opinion, less well attended due to lack of connection to the larger student body. In the positive formation, although students tend to avoid institutionalized events, Senior Week draws a crowd "because in the end it's all about the people."

The events are about the students, not the events themselves. One student noted the seeming institutional confusion with this concept: the Student Government Association has a quantity over quality mentality. This particular student had an outsider's perspective of community at St. Olaf. A recent transfer student from Luther College, this junior male had a

foil with which to compare campus life. At Luther, the events are few and far between, but when an event occurs, everyone goes, longing for the connection with the broader student body. At St. Olaf, in contrast, there is always something going on. There is a dance essentially once a week, for example. Because the events are so often, and the students are spread so thin in their academic lives, it is difficult to attend even a portion of offered events. As a result, students don't find the same community connection at the offered events.

### **Identity Evolution and its Shift Over Four Years: Student Intra-Institution**

One the eve of its hundredth year, Christmas fest is common experience that creates a community among Oles. Whether they loved it or hated it, all Oles are connected to it. However, the manner in which Christmas Fest manifests has changed multiple times over the past century. In the same way, the class of 2011 is vastly different, not just from the first graduating class but also from themselves four years ago. The creation of institutional culture and its implementation plays out differently for a first-year targeted for "inoculation" than it does for a almost-there senior. There are several notable shifts in students community experience over their four years at St. Olaf.

#### ***Classroom***

The classroom plays an increasingly significant role in the formation of identity over an Oles four years. Students reported increased connection with their fellow majors after moving out of intro and 100-level classes. One senior commented that her conversations with classmates about non-academic topics was much more rich because of the shared vocabulary, assigned texts and classroom experiences. Underclassmen were not excluded from building friendships based in the classroom and regarded the academic intensity as providing the "best

of times in the worst of conditions.” One upperclassmen commented on how stress has become a tradition at St. Olaf, and students can bond over looming deadlines.

### ***Social Scene Institutionalization***

The social scene at St. Olaf is most heavily institutionalized in the first year, particularly Week One. Play Fair, an ice-breaking event for first-year students, was a regular reference when students spoke about institutionally supported social events. While students complained of the forced awkwardness with a certain nostalgia, they also acknowledged the crucial role it played in getting students comfortable talking to each other. A focus group comprised of upperclassmen agreed that it was a mechanical event necessary for the formation of organic social bonds. One transfer student even wished he had been invited to play fair because the common experience seemed to bond so many students and in an interview, a sophomore mentioned her longing to be in the same place at the same time as all of her peers: “I could really go for another Play Fair right now!”

Lutefest, an annual music festival, was another commonly mentioned institution-supported event. Underclassmen, particularly first-years mentioned the hype surrounding the upcoming event they had never attended. Upperclassmen, particularly seniors, took a more critical view of Lutefest, commenting on the increased security over the years. They saw the additional hired security guards as destructive to the community of the event but mentioned a communal attitude of rebellion. The tradition itself is shifting because the event is heavily weather-dependent and varying levels of drunkenness effect reflections of the experience; one student pointedly said, “What can you honestly remember except that you had a good time?”

### ***Hierarchy***

While there is a superficial hierarchy based on achievement and class year, the importance of class hierarchy seemed to become less important each year. Coming from high school, first-year students are used to the stricter social hierarchies of class year and are initially surprised when they find that class year is less important in college as classes are generally comprised of a mix of class years. One student commented feeling a gradual loss of the need to impress his peers or be impressive.

A reason for the diminishing of the hierarchical structure on-campus could be that the goal of the social network shifts. In high school, individuals live as part of a nuclear family; they have intimate emotional and physical needs met in a tangible way by the family structure. However, in college, the family structure becomes a more distant form of support for students. In high school, social capital is a kind of a luxury, the peer group becomes used as such. However, at an institution of higher learning in which most individuals live away from their families, the peer group becomes the means of finding that intimate network of emotional and physical support. These relationships become laced with responsibility and become necessary. One student expressed the need to “create an immediate family” that continues to evolve during her time here.

### ***Inclusivity/Exclusivity***

There is a shift in the way students exclude or include according to their living situation, class year, and activities. In defining a community, underclassmen often discussed this in terms of “having each others’ back,” “obligatory first-year friends,” and responsibility to each other while upperclassmen talked about the “degrees of separation--never more than two at St. Olaf” and the web of interconnectedness.

Michel Foucault's *Panopticon* theory can help explain this difference between under- and upperclassmen. The *Panopticon* theory asserts that constantly we observe and are observed. In this way, we feel pressure to adhere to social rules and norms because, if not, we will be outed instantly, for constantly we are observed. Underclassmen students assuredly feel pressure to "fit in" within the already established St. Olaf community. This pressure is heightened by Foucault's theory in that underclassmen feel constantly observed by other, possible friend groups, and also are constantly observing others in order to find "their place." The sentiment of "having each others' back" from underclassmen, then, highlights a defense mechanism: that due to pressure to fit in, underclassmen scrutinize others, and in doing so realize that others are most likely scrutinizing them--to alleviate this pressure, they watch out for each other by creating safety nets of student support. Upperclassmen, too, realize the *Panopticon* effect, but for them, as already established members of the community, it acts as a positive: reinforcing already established friend groups, and providing a possible gateway into other groups. Whereas underclassmen seem to have their identity based more on inclusion in one exclusive group like a sports team or first-year corridor, upperclassmen articulated that the first-years just wouldn't "get it" that St. Olaf community is built on inclusion and interconnectedness. With the advent of junior year students reported feeling a certain panic at the short amount of time left--"only 2 years! only 3 semesters! only 1 year left!"--and felt a shared goal with common urgency to get the most out of their remaining time.

### ***Domestic Effects of Global Perspective***

Over seventy percent of St. Olaf students study off-campus during their undergraduate years, a portion large enough to influence the community shift. The rotation of friends heading

overseas shakes the social groups which were until then heavily based on “obligatory first-years friends” and organizations with high cohesion like sports teams. The international splintering allows for the creation of new friend groups, both on campus and through off-campus trip bonding. It is important to note that these connections do not replace but supplement the friendships built first-year. One student commented that after “what you go through first-year and the first people know you at your most awkward or worst, you owe it to them to stick together.”

In conclusion of our discussion section, it is important to note that it matters not so much with whom you attend Lutfest each year, but more so that you do attend. The general shift over four years is one of inclusivity. Ritualized events create community but not relationships. Relationships are within communities but a community is not a relationship but a web, if you will. Relationships aren’t necessary for community. A senior could not know a single first-year but they are still in community.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

“The gut feeling brings you here. And we all have that gut feeling. That’s significant. St. Olaf wasn’t about getting through it and leaving.” St. Olaf is about the process of being here: starting out as a first year, eager and malleable; learning how to be an Ole with all your Oleness; enduring the shift of community as it forms your identity; and taking your identity with you as a community in action away from the Hill. Most significant in our findings is the immense power and control the institution has in crafting a framework through which the community is built. Expanding the definition of traditions and rituals to that of identity-

forming, we now understand the process and role of all kinds of traditions and roles within the St. Olaf community.

One senior student said that we now know that community and identity are “dynamic and fluid, even though traditions persist. Events change but we still talk about it as if it’s the same thing.” Though activities may be completely different, what matters is that we have “a time to gather outside and have fun. It’s important because we gave it meaning.”

As advice to the St. Olaf community, being aware of the framework established by the institution, one can know how to navigate the community and the formation of their own identity over their four years here. As for institutional advice, we suggest that St. Olaf College interact with its students in ways that demand active participation, as opposed to passive participation. For example, instead of screening a movie for students--an event which only calls for students to inhabit the same space without interacting any further than that--create more cooperative learning opportunities. During the semester of our research, students in a music composition course teamed with those in a choreography course. The students from each course worked in pairs or small groups to create a project, the composition student writing music for the choreography student’s dance piece. Both students share a common goal to create together--they must interact; this builds community more effectively than watching a film together, and then leaving without student-to-student interaction.

As we reflect on the research process and results, we have come to appreciate the power and extent of ethnographic research. Both of our focus groups and every interview gave us a peak through the window of culture that we hadn’t seen before because we have always been a part of the community. But for a moment, we need to step back and look deeper into what it is we’ve grown through and loved about this wonderful life at St. Olaf College.

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