

Getting Help:  
The Role of the Counseling Center in the Lives of St. Olaf Community  
Members

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Abstract

The counseling center provides support for members of the St. Olaf community seeking guidance regarding mental and emotional health. Our project investigates the role of counseling and therapy in the lives of St. Olaf students. The project also delves into perceptions of students, faculty, and professors in regards to the counseling center and the ways in which these effect participation in counseling services. We investigated contemporary knowledge of subjects concerning counseling and the Counseling Center. Information was gathered using interviews of students, faculty, professors, and counseling center staff. Findings communicate positive perceptions of the Counseling Center but negative perceptions of counseling and mental health issues in general.

## **Setting**

Our study took place at St. Olaf College, a small, private, liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest. During the course of this study, the spring of 2010, St. Olaf had a total enrollment of 3,099 students. The students represent all 50 states and also 30 different countries. Student to faculty ratio decreased from the last few years and was currently at 12.3 students for every 1 faculty member. Class sizes typically remain small as 96% of all classes have less than 50 students with 60% of total classes having less than 20. For this and many other reasons, tuition and fees were \$35,500 for the academic school year.

Furthermore, St. Olaf College has 27 varsity athletic teams participating in NCAA Division III sports, eight choirs, two orchestras, two bands, and 165 registered student organizations. One constantly hears phrases referring to the myriad groups and can find repeated phrases in St. Olaf student planners stating, “Get involved now, not later” and, “Find your match!” Generally, St. Olaf College offers many ways for a student to get involved on campus.

For this study, we focused largely on the Counseling Center. The Counseling Center is located on St. Olaf Avenue in an honor house named Boe House. Originally the center was located in the Old Main Annex but was moved four years ago because the annex was going to be torn down. The St. Olaf Counseling Center location is relatively secluded considering the size of the college. It is set slightly back from the road with a winding path leading up to the front porch. The front of the house is mostly covered by large shrubs and has a cottage feel. The main entrance of the two story house opens to a waiting room equipped with chairs, a fireplace and the desk of the administrative

assistant, Diane. Some side tables offer magazines and brochures for entertainment while waiting. Stillness presides over the waiting room as individuals wait to be seen and Diane works behind her desk. Each counseling room is set up differently but most have a few chairs, some bookshelves and a desk.

Currently, the Counseling Center is made up of about six psychologists, a social worker, a licensed dietician, three graduate student interns, one psychiatrist and Diane, the administrative assistant. Together, this team administers individual, group, and nutrition counseling, medication consultations, workshops and seminars, testing, consultations and referrals to other services. They also offer resources in the form of pamphlets and online links for issues ranging from ADD to nutrition.

The Counseling Center offers free mental, emotional and nutritional health services to St. Olaf students in a confidential setting. From our perspective, the Counseling Center appeared to be a helpful resource for St. Olaf students, but we wanted to investigate their perceptions as well as the perceptions of faculty and staff to better understand the role of the Counseling Center in the lives of St. Olaf students.

## **Methodology**

For this study we administered interviews with students, professors, and faculty. We used email to contact our interviewees, first contacting students we were familiar with. We then used the snowball method and asked our interviewees to inform us of any other people we could interview. Using this method we administered 14 one-on-one interviews over the course of three weeks. Our interviews represented males and females from all four class years as well as professors from different fields. The bulk of our

interviews were done in a semi-private, on-campus eatery—the Cage. Interviews were held at secluded tables away from the center of bustling café activity. Professor interviews were done in private offices.

We chose to conduct our interviews in this fashion because we wanted to make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible. When we would meet our student interviewees in front of the Cage we would suggest moving to a more secluded and confidential place. However, students preferred to maintain a spot in the Cage and answer questions in the comfort of a place well known to them. We agreed to this setting because we wanted the students to answer our questions with rich, detailed answers and decided the best way to elicit answers of that quality would be to make students feel comfortable. Furthermore, we interviewed professors in their offices for the same reasons. They felt most comfortable interviewing in their offices and we wanted them to feel comfortable while answering. We informed our interviewees that we intended to use pseudonyms in our paper and have replaced all information that could be used to ascertain an interviewee's identity.

Our interviews were semi-formal, involving scripted questions while allowing room for probing questions. Questions focused on central concepts of the counseling center including knowledge of the services offered, perceptions about the services, general perceptions of students regarding mental health and wellness at St. Olaf, as well as ideas for improvement of counseling center services.

The methodology we used to conduct our research had strengths that helped us to realize our research question but also weaknesses potentially hindering our research. We interviewed both professors and students because we wanted to elicit responses from not

only students but also individuals in constant contact with students who bear outsiders' perspectives. Because of the way we conducted our study we were able to elicit many detailed responses from students and professors. Students felt comfortable while being interviewed in the Cage and normally would look around at passers-by while constructing their answers. Professors felt comfortable enough to disclose personal thoughts in the safety of their own offices. Also, because our interviews were done in a semi-formal manner, interviewees were able to talk the majority of the time without interruption. Furthermore, because we interviewed people we knew, our interviewees could talk to us with ease about situations that both interviewer and interviewee were familiar with.

Our methodology was not without weakness, however. We interviewed individuals we knew, though not well. Because of this, interviewees were more likely to hesitate before saying something personal. Though this did not appear to be a problem, it most likely caused some interviewees to withhold pieces of information. Also, because we interviewed individuals in a semi-formal setting we talked only to ask questions, react to responses, and probe for additional information. As we did not engage in discussion with our interviewees their responses did not continue further than what they initially responded.

Because of the methodology we employed our results may have limits to being generalizable. First, the college we investigated is small, private, and in the Upper Midwest. Consequently, our results may not apply to other institutions of larger size in other areas. Also, our sample included only 14 students, professors, and faculty. As St. Olaf has an enrollment of over three thousand with many professors and even more

faculty, our results may not encompass all perceptions held at St. Olaf. However, due to time constraints our sample size was sufficient for our purposes.

We also considered some ethical issues during our research including informed consent and confidentiality. Our response to the issue of informed consent was preparing a Project Information Statement explaining our project and the rights of the interviewee. We read this to each interviewee before our interviews began. Furthermore, we addressed our issues with confidentiality by using pseudonyms for every interviewee throughout the paper and removing identifying information from the interview notes. We submitted our research topic and Project Information Statement to the St. Olaf Institutional Review Board. It was examined and approved according to the St. Olaf Code of Ethics and federal regulations.

## **Review of Literature**

Counseling can be a great resource for those struggling with mental or emotional health issues. The placement of counseling centers on a college campus can potentially help students overwhelmed with academics, friends, or life in general. According to Bishop, “It is becoming more widely recognized that the existence of a college counseling center, armed with resources that are adequate for the population of the campus, can be a key factor in managing crises, assisting in recruitment and retention efforts, and reducing liability risks” (2006:17). Counseling centers play a vital role in the maintenance of college students’ mental health making it an essential piece of the student wellness puzzle.

As we began studying literature written about college counseling centers we came across studies pertaining to many facets of college life. Though many of these studies did not apply to our initial research question we found it necessary to review them in order to hone our own research as well as gain a deeper understanding of prior research. For instance, previous studies on roles of the counseling center have focused on certain aspects of college counseling such as helping with the difficulties of being a freshman as well as the issue of hopelessness (Kashani and Priesmeyer, 1983; Williams, Galanter, Dermatis, et al, 2008). These studies narrow in on the issues specific to college life; college counseling centers help to focus on these problems.

Researchers have also investigated the disparity of using the counseling center due to differences in gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity as well as the use of the counseling center by those considering themselves to be in distress (Rosenthal and Wilson, 2008). This study showed that students reporting distress were more likely to use counseling and also found no disparity in use of mental health services due to the aforementioned differences.

Other studies have examined the ways counseling centers can help college students by documenting issues of students as well as assisting in career development (Gibson, 2000; Hinkelman and Luzzo, 2007). Gibson investigates mental health documentation and the ways it can help ensure that accommodations are supplied to aid students. Hinkelman and Luzzo discuss the connection between mental health status and career development concluding that psychosocial development is crucial for academic and work related success.

Further studies have found that counseling centers are beneficial to students and provide them with effective treatment (Lee, Olson, Locke, et al, 2009; Vonk and Thyer, 1999). Both of these studies investigated the positive effects of counseling centers in the lives of students. Lee, Olson, Locke, et al. found that students were more likely to remain enrolled in school if receiving counseling. Similarly, Vonk and Thyer found that short-term treatment provided to students by counseling centers proved largely effective; students were tested against a symptom checklist to determine the usefulness of short-term treatment and were found to have improved.

Researchers have also looked at the historical changes counseling has gone through as well as the increase in problems over time (Kraft, 2009; Erdur-Baker, Aberson, Barrow, et al, 2006). Kraft illustrates the history of college counseling and the ways the current system allows for a more effective counseling experience. Erdur-Baker, Aberson, Barrow, et al. address the history of counseling as well but also discuss the increase in students' self-reporting of issues and mental health problems over time.

Some studies delving further into the issue of increased reporting have found an increase in self-reported distress among college students as well as a general increase in the number of students with mental health issues (Cornish, Riva, Henderson, et al, 2000; Mowbray, Megivern, Mandiberg, et al, 2006). Cornish, Riva, Henderson, et al. found after investigating a counseling center over a number of years that there was an increase in the number of students with extreme distress but not an overall increase in distress. Mowbray, Megivern, Mandiberg, et al. found that college officials have indicated a rise in students with mental health conditions and they present recommendations on responses.

Stemming from research that mental health issues are growing on campus are studies relating to the challenges brought about by this growth (Kitzrow, 2003). Kitzrow discusses the changing needs of students in regard to mental health, the implications of student mental health at colleges and universities, and some potential strategies for responding.

Some researchers have investigated potential responses to the increase in demand and have looked at the financial reasons for increasing counseling center services as well as ways to help counseling centers with financial issues (Osberg, 2004; Bishop, 2006). Osberg discusses the fiscal reasons to increase mental health services on campus. He suggests that if universities have higher education as a goal it is necessary for them to offer enough mental health services for their students to be able to succeed in academia and focus on their studies. Bishop also focuses on the finances of counseling. He discusses the increased acknowledgment of the mental health of students as an argument for attaching a counseling fee to tuition to ease the financial burden on institutions. Also, he focuses on the importance of communication between the counseling center and the institution in order to convey what is necessary for the counseling resources to adequately serve students.

Other researchers have investigated the stigma attached to mental health issues and illnesses (Overton and Medina, 2008; Quinn, Wilson, MacIntyre, et al, 2009). Overton and Medina investigated the stigma surrounding mental health issues and the ways people use social constructs to judge people afflicted with these issues. Quinn, Wilson, MacIntyre, et al. studied the stigma attached to counseling services as well. However, they also delve into the ways this negative connotation can make students

reluctant to seek counseling services as they are anxious about the potential judgment facing them.

Finally, we researched theories of social constructionism as well as behaviorism. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann theorized that people interacting with each other form representations of these actions as they are frequently repeated or habitualized. Representations become part of a society and thus create social constructions of reality (Calhoun, 2007). Furthermore, George Mead theorized that meaning in a society is made through human action or behaviors. These behaviors thus influence how the mind and body are shaped (Calhoun, 2007).

We understand that counseling centers affect students' lives as well as the institution they are a part of, but we were particularly interested in investigating the perceptions of students and faculty in regards to the counseling center. Our research gathered more info about student and faculty perceptions of the counseling center as well as their suggestions for potential improvement.

### **Problem/Theoretical Framework**

We began our research with the intention of studying the role of the Counseling Center in the lives of St. Olaf Students. Literature about Counseling Centers on college campuses presented us with ideas of problems circulating within the study of Counseling Centers.

One of the first issues we found was that of an increase from years past in the self-reporting as well as the increase of problems and issues of students. For example, Erdur-Baker, Aberson, Barrow et al. found that the chronicity as well as the severity of

students' mental health issues is increasing over time (2006). This correlation led us to question the perceptions students have of this increase in issues such as stress, as well as the corresponding change in use of counseling services due to this increase. Our interest in this increase led us to narrow our topic to a more specific focus. Because one of us had previously done research concerning stress and St. Olaf students, we wanted to gauge the perceptions of St. Olaf students regarding stress on campus to address some of the issues that remained unclear in previous research. As Hinkelman and Luzzo show, issues of anxiety and stress tie closely to issues with mental health thus hindering growth in areas such as career development (2007). Our research evolved from these texts and we honed in on perceptions of the St. Olaf Counseling Center as well as the effects of stress on students.

Furthermore, throughout the beginning of our research we found literature reporting the potential for improvement among counseling centers and became interested in students' ideas of ways the counseling center could improve. For example, Osberg investigates the fiscal reasons for increasing counseling services for college students. He believes that students would benefit from being offered more services and this would in turn help the university or college (2004). This led us to delve deeper into the ways counseling services could improve. Do St. Olaf students feel more resources are necessary? Thus, we investigated the opinions of students and professors in regard to the potential improvement of the Counseling Center's services. We found it important to address the perceptions students have about a resource designed for their use.

We also found research expressing the benefits of counseling to students. For example, Lee, Olson, Locke, et al. investigated the connection between counseling

services and student retention as well as academic performance. They found that counseling services did have an effect on student retention and led to some academic benefits (2009). Our interest in this research led us to incorporate the study of the benefits of the Counseling Center in our research.

Moreover, research investigating the stigma placed on those with mental health issues by society furthered our understanding of the issues of potential problems with how individuals understand counseling. For example, Quinn, Wilson, MacIntyre, et al. describe how students in higher education may be less likely to use counseling services due to the stigma attached to mental health issues. This led us to formulate our research to include ideas of potential stigmas existing in regard to mental health issues as well as the offering of mental health services.

Finally, we found it pertinent to shape our research in regards to theory presented by Berger and Luckmann as well as Mead. Their theories present ideas about the social construction of society. We developed our ideas regarding these theories because we wanted to better understand the way students at St. Olaf created meaning through interactions and how those meanings played a role in their use and perceptions of the Counseling Center. For example, Berger and Luckmann state, “Social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them” (1966:48). Social structure constructs reality. These two theories helped to form the basis of our understanding of the ways a society, such as a college campus, can influence the lives of students.

. These problems shaped our research until it became focused on perceptions of St. Olaf community members on the Counseling Center and ways the Counseling Center could improve their services

## **Findings**

Throughout the interview process we talked to many people with differing opinions about the Counseling Center's services as well as the perceptions held on campus about the Counseling Center. Though much of what we found differed for each interviewee, we also found many patterns in the responses given.

### Knowledge about the Counseling Center and Services Offered

The first pattern emerging from our interviews was the mixed understanding of the Counseling Center and the services offered there. Out of the eleven students interviewed two individuals had never heard of the Counseling Center prior to the interview, six had heard of it but had not used the services offered, and three had utilized counseling services. One of the interviewees unfamiliar with the Counseling Center is a senior and had never heard of the services offered. Another interviewee was far more familiar with the services offered than the other interviewees and offered some information of her own.

Although this discrepancy was found, a pattern of knowledge was still uncovered. Despite the two interviewees who had never heard of the Counseling Center the other nine students interviewed had knowledge of the services offered and had a general grasp of the purpose of the center. Some had heard of the center through week-one flyers and sessions while others learned of it through friends. For example, one student, Tom, said,

“I heard about the Counseling Center through [Junior Coordinator] training. Counselors came up and gave us a session about it before the school year started.”

Furthermore, we found a pattern pertaining to the knowledge students have about the services provided. All nine of the student interviewees who had heard of the Counseling Center knew where it was located as well as at least a few of the services provided. One student, Marie, stated, “I know... they have several counselors and a psychiatrist that can write prescriptions.” Most students spoke of the counseling offered to students as a means to help individuals sort through issues that friends could not always help with. The Counseling Center provided a type of unbiased support for those who needed help they could not receive from the typical sources. Another student, Anne, explained that the Counseling Center provided a place for students to go when they needed to talk about their feelings and problems.

Finally, all nine student interviewees who had previously heard of the Counseling Center knew and made a point of discussing the lack of payment necessary to utilize the services offered by the center. One student, Erika, upon being asked about her knowledge of the center responded immediately with, “I know it’s a free service offered to students on weekdays.” The other student interviewees responded similarly expressing the importance of having the option to utilize the services offered without worrying about payment options.

#### Counseling Beneficial to St. Olaf Students

Another pattern found from analyzing interview data was the general consensus about the benefits of counseling. After discussing with interviewees about general Counseling Center knowledge we asked them if they knew anyone who or if they

personally had used the Counseling Center's services and if the services were found beneficial. Those who had heard of someone who had used the services offered, nine of the eleven, all stated that the services were found to be beneficial.

A few interviewees said they had heard of a few students having bad experiences. For example, one professor, Shelly, said, "I teach a class and I've heard from people in the class who have eating disorders that went. They said that it was not helpful and a bit frustrating." Another student mentioned a friend who had a bad experience as well and did not return for more counseling.

However, with the exception of these two cases, the majority of respondents expressed the ways the Counseling Center was beneficial. Most had positive comments including one student, Belle, who had used the services and talked about the attractiveness of the center's confidentiality policy as well as the different perspective offered by the counselors; she found the services to be suitable for her needs. Similar to the prior research we found, students at St. Olaf found the Counseling Center services to be widely beneficial and effective at helping students with issues.

Furthermore, the director of the Counseling Center, Steve O'Neil, had many statistics regarding student satisfaction regarding the services offered. In a survey conducted involving 455 students who have used the Counseling Center services over the past five years only eight students have found the services unhelpful to the issues they were dealing with. This finding was similar to previous research which found that counseling can be beneficial to a student's wellness.

### Ease of Access

Following the responses on the benefits of counseling, interviewees were asked about the ease of accessing the Counseling Center. Interviewees tended to respond positively to this question. For example, one student, Tonya stated, “In terms of location I do think it’s easy to access. It’s really close to campus and easy to walk there.” Most students responded similarly stating that the location of the Counseling Center was generally easy to access and would not stop someone from using the services. Marie responded that she really liked the location of the Counseling Center. She hoped other interviewees were not requesting the services be transferred back to campus as, “It’s important to get off the hill when you are talking about things that are happening on the hill. It’s important spatially.” Those interviewees that had previously heard of the Counseling Center all commented positively on the ease of accessing services.

However, responses did include statements about the barriers to access involving negative perceptions about utilizing the services. For example, Tonya went on to state that she had, “heard it’s difficult to walk in to the building the first time because people feel as if everyone knows where you are going.” Spatially, the Counseling Center was seen as easy to access but many students focused on the issue of the stigma connected to counseling services.

### Stigma

Prior to beginning data collection we found many studies focused on the stigma attached to counseling and the ways students perceived this stigma. We decided to include questions about the stigma surrounding counseling in our interviews and were able to find a pattern similar to prior research. Following questions about the ease of

accessing the Counseling Center, interviewees transitioned responses to the perceived stigma of counseling and mental distress.

Most student interviewees stated that counseling services were widely stigmatized in society. However, students also responded that the Counseling Center did not have a stigma attached. For example, one student, Ralph, commented, “Unless you felt negatively about the Counseling Center I don’t think there would be any stigma attached. For people going there for the first time there would be a stigma attached because you are unsure what will happen and what people will think about you.” In this way, interviewees discussed the ways a stigma was present in regards to counseling, but also presented the idea that this stigma was not directly aimed at the Counseling Center.

The stigma attached to counseling was present in a vast majority of responses. One student, Bill, who had made use of the Counseling Center before stated, “If there are negative connotations I think they are toward counseling in general, not the counseling center. They’re toward depression, anxiety, and mental health issues.” This dichotomy was found in most responses; counseling is stigmatized but the Counseling Center is not. Tonya responded that the taboo surrounding counseling as well as the lack of familiarity with the center itself worked together to silence the topic of counseling and mental health. She went on to state that students may not talk about mental health issues because they are wary of perceptions of others.

Our respondents made it clear that a stigma is associated with counseling and mental health issues on campus. Though the Counseling Center may be seen as a beneficial entity without stigma attached, students still felt as though counseling was negatively perceived. Though students maintained that there is a stigma associated with

counseling, none of them had encountered another student who had negative perceptions and most maintained counseling to be an important entity at St. Olaf.

These findings were similar yet different from previous research. Quinn, Wilson, MacIntyre, et al. discussed the ways that negative stigma surrounding college counseling is present and can cause students to be deterred from accessing aid. Our respondents replied similarly that counseling and mental health issues have stigma attached. However, respondents also stated that although counseling carries a stigma, the Counseling Center does not have that same attachment. Thus, students may feel uncomfortable accessing the services of the Counseling Center at first, but the perceived stigma does not seem to apply directly to the Counseling Center.

#### Wellness and Stress at St. Olaf

Emerging from the discussion of counseling and the stigma attached to it is a pattern connecting wellness and stress issues on campus. Students realize that health may become secondary to their responsibilities to schoolwork, activities, and the stress that goes with them.

For example, one student, Ian, discussed the difficulty of managing school and health. He stated, "It's easy to fall into unhealthy patterns just to stay ahead of your responsibilities." St. Olaf community members recognize the stress that is present at St. Olaf and the ways it can affect student performance. One professor, Ken, discussed the ways mental health issues such as stress can affect students' performance in academia saying, "Students who put pressure on themselves enjoy experiences less. It especially hinders performance on exams."

Though an awareness of the effects of stressful responsibilities pervaded the discourse of students and professors, most interviewees discussed the reasonable level of stress at St. Olaf. Many students thought that St. Olaf students had above average stress levels but expressed that the levels were not too high or over the top. Tonya stated, “I don’t think it’s an over amount of stress. It’s for normal reasons like, ‘I have this and this and this to do this week.’ It’s a natural amount of stress for being in college.” Interviewees would present their understanding of how stressful responsibilities interfere with wellness but when asked about stress levels would comment on natural stress maintaining that it is normal for students to be stressed. Though students are aware of this connection between stress and health issues, many do not see this connection as an issue but as simply a natural side effect of being a college student.

### Wellness Center

Following this pattern of a connection between well-being and stress is the use of campus health centers such as the Wellness Center. The purpose of this organization is stated on the website as, “The Wellness Center serves as a resource to promote awareness and education on issues relating to healthy lifestyles.” It became a source of interest for us to see if a connection existed between stress affecting health and the use of the Wellness Center.

First, it became apparent that staff at the St. Olaf Counseling and Wellness Centers share strong relationships. One of the psychologists at the Counseling Center is the advisor to the Wellness Center concerning mental health services and is occasionally asked to give presentations at Wellness Center activities. Also, other staff members at the Counseling Center have given presentations at Wellness Center activities. In addition to

these presentations, staff will also provide information for student-led Wellness Center presentations. Many St. Olaf community members are unaware of the close tie between these health centers, even if they make use of the resources provided by each organization.

Though students understand there are health risks due to large amounts of stress, they are not likely to use the Wellness Center unless “forced to” by the teacher of a gym class. Students also do not view the Wellness Center as a source of aid. For example, one student, Anne, responded that she did make use of Wellness Center activities but only for class requirements. She found them to be sometimes beneficial but sometimes not because, “some just show a YouTube clip and give a two minute presentation.” Also, other students did not make use of Wellness Center activities at all claiming they had never been in a gym class before and thus had never needed to go.

Moreover, many students did not make a connection between mental health or overall health and the Wellness Center instead connecting physical education classes with the Wellness Center. For example, one student, Christine, stated, “I’ve only been to [activities] that have been for classes and I have not really been impressed.” The interviewees all made statements solely about Wellness Center activities but did not make mention of the center itself. Though students know about the center they may not make the connection between healthfulness, well-being and the Wellness Center.

### Improving the Counseling Center

Finally, interviewees were asked about any ideas for potential improvements for the Counseling Center. Though many interviewees had not used the services offered

almost all interviewees had a response presenting their opinions about potential improvements.

First, a pattern emerged from the responses of almost all interviewees about the difficulty to get an appointment when necessary. Ralph had responded in the beginning of the interview that he had thought of using the services earlier in his college career but had not. He went on to state, “Last fall when I was thinking about using it, one of my thoughts was, ‘I don’t want to have to wait, make an appointment and then have [the issue] go away and waste an appointment.’” Other respondents replied with similar answers. Tonya referenced the difficulty in getting an appointment with the psychiatrist in order to get prescriptions. She stated, “I think a lot of the frustration stems from not being able to get an appointment with the psychiatrist when you need one.” Marie suggested online scheduling as a way around the appointment issue. She stated that although it is helpful to call and talk to someone to schedule an appointment, the call itself can be really stressful.

Though our student interviewees felt strongly about the lack of available appointments, Steve O’Neil feels quite differently. He responded that therapists have pretty flexible time slots and, “compared to the Allina Clinic in Northfield it takes significantly less time to make an appointment.” Though he disagreed with the difficulty in arranging an appointment for counseling, Steve did agree with the difficulties of arranging an appointment with the psychiatrist. He stated that the psychiatrist is the only one on staff and it is quite difficult to get an appointment with him.

Second, a pattern emerged in interviewees’ comments about the lack of advertising around campus for the Counseling Center. Thirteen of our fourteen

interviewees responded that some sort of effort should be made to make the Counseling Center more publicly known to students. When asked about potential improvements Professor Shelly stated, “Maybe they could have more publicity or more promotion among faculty.” Students, such as Belle, felt similarly. She stated that the services could be made more known to the public so more students would know it was an option. Every student felt the services could be better advertised. The two students interviewed with no experience with the Counseling Center agreed. One of those students, Miguel, responded that he has a lot of friends who could benefit from the services offered but they do not use it. This could be due to a stigma but he also stated more publicity would be helpful.

Though our interviewees almost unanimously stated that more publicity or advertising would be helpful in making students more aware of the Counseling Center and the services offered there, Steve provided the opposite side of this discussion. Steve expressed his knowledge of the high demand of counseling services but also talked about the limited supply of services. The center is not equipped with a big enough facility or enough staff members to be able to satisfy the entire population’s needs. Steve acknowledged that if the Counseling Center promoted more than they do currently, the center would be overbooked. Overbooking could lead to many issues; some students in serious distress may not receive the services they need. Steve addressed this issue as problematic and has taken some steps to make the Counseling Center more accessible in regards to obtaining services.

This past academic year, staff at the Counseling Center conducted an informational seminar with the Academic Administrative Assistants of many departments at St. Olaf. The Counseling Center hoped to promote awareness, educate St. Olaf

community members, and give individuals from multiple areas on campus a sense of what it is like to be a St. Olaf student. Sharing this information with the Academic Administrative Assistants allowed each department to become better equipped to help faculty when suggesting resources to students.

Furthermore, once a year the Counseling Center holds depression screenings in the commons area at St. Olaf called Buntrock. These screenings are advertised and the event normally has a large turnout every year. However, these advertisements are the only ones students may see publicizing the Counseling Center.

Although advertisements are almost non-existent, the Counseling Center still attempts to make sure people in authoritative or guidance positions know about the Counseling Center. Students who are Junior Counselors and Residents' Assistants are required to undergo training with Counseling Center staff. Thus, students are usually surrounded by a large network of people with knowledge of the mental health services offered. Though the Counseling Center takes these steps to attempt to spread their message, faculty at the Counseling Center, professors, and students agree that better advertisement would help to raise awareness about mental health services offered at St. Olaf.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Throughout this study we have looked at professor, faculty, and student perceptions of the Counseling Center. Though the Counseling Center is not a key aspect of St. Olaf for many students, it is still an important entity for many people; those who do not utilize it emphasize its importance as well.

Studying perceptions of the Counseling Center helped us to unravel some commonly held ideologies at St. Olaf. We were able to observe the way social constructionism plays a large role in the way students understand themselves as well as the greater St. Olaf community. Students embody the constructed ideologies and are thus simultaneously shaping the St. Olaf culture and being shaped by the culture. It is necessary for students to assume these ideals in order to be part of the culture. The stigma surrounding counseling is perpetuated by social constructionism in St. Olaf society as well as the larger community.

Furthermore, the Counseling Center provides a beneficial service to St. Olaf students. Steve commented on the increasing amount of students with depression, anxiety, and other psychological complexities over the past few decades. The Counseling Center provides an environment able to fulfill the needs of students requiring assistance with these mental health issues. Students find the center to be helpful in times of need.

Moreover, stress provides students with challenges to their well-being. However, though students understand this infringement, they do not perceive the stress at St. Olaf to be higher than average levels. Students also do not see overall health to be an issue at St. Olaf. Many interviewees claimed that St. Olaf community members are proficient in maintaining their well-being.

Our study provides the St. Olaf body with a few implications for use in the community. First, it brings about the discussion of stigmatized mental health and counseling discourse. Understanding the social construction of the stigma embedded in ideas of counseling can help St. Olaf community members to cross socially created boundaries and ask questions about what it means to use counseling services.

Second, our study addresses the ways community members perceive stress on campus. Students are constantly exposed to the social acceptability that comes with being overstressed and busy. This study asks students to step away from that socially constructed norm, think about their actual levels of stress, and adopt better management strategies.

Finally, our research brings about a discussion on the proposed improvements for the Counseling Center. Interviewees expressed a desire for more advertising and publicity while Steve focused on the importance of maintaining the services that are currently offered. Our study brings this dilemma to light in hopes that St. Olaf community members will better understand the pressures associated with offering counseling services.

Further research could explore the financial situation of the Counseling Center and the ways this affects students requiring services. Perhaps with more funding, counseling services could be expanded substantially. Also, further research could investigate the effects of counseling on student performance in academia. Our focus was primarily on perceptions of the Counseling Center, but it would be interesting to examine the effects the Counseling Center has on the students who use its services.

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