

**Integrating the Liberal Arts, Career, and Vocation:
St. Olaf Student, Faculty, and Staff Perceptions and
Insights Surrounding the Main Street Project**

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Executive Summary

Abstract

Our project analyzes the perceptions and insights of students, faculty, and staff regarding St. Olaf's recent institutional focus on career planning through the Main Street Project. We interviewed select St. Olaf students, faculty, and staff, as well as the college president David Anderson, about what they believed to be the most important immediate direction for students upon graduation. We included questions about the importance of higher education and particularly the liberal arts, as well as the importance of the mission statement in the student's educational experience and postgraduate career and vocational choices.

Summary of Findings

- There has been a lack of communication among the president, faculty, staff, and students about the Main Street Project.
- Few students and faculty are aware of what the Main Street Project is, including those who are directly involved in its development and implementation.
- Among those involved, there is general enthusiasm for the potential of the Main Street Project.
- Without a clear understanding of its purpose and goals, and no further seen application, there has been much concern and irritation among the student body.

Setting and Community

Founded in 1874, St. Olaf is a private four-year liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America located in Northfield, Minnesota. It has an enrollment of approximately 3,000 students and offers majors in 39 areas of discipline (St. Olaf College, 2012). Its liberal arts foundation means that it has a broad and interdisciplinary educational perspective. Thus, it is often stated that one's specific major is unimportant; it is the liberal arts experience that counts. As a college of the church, St. Olaf encourages continual religious conversation. Students are required to complete two full credits of theological study, but the college's approach to Christianity has been described as critical rather than indoctrinating or reinforcing.

The college's mission statement also refers to a "global perspective" (St. Olaf College, 1987). To a large extent, this idea is practiced through St. Olaf's extensive opportunities to study abroad. 77% of the class of 2011 participated in off-campus programs during their enrollment at St. Olaf, and 68% participated in international programs (St. Olaf College, 2011). The global perspective is often seen in conjunction with another closely related element of "unselfish service to others." Although interpretations of this phrase vary among members of the institution, it is often presented in the context of volunteerism.

St. Olaf faces several strategic challenges, one of which is communicating its value amidst an economic recession and a growing skepticism toward the liberal arts. Even with a comprehensive annual fee of \$46,950 (St. Olaf College, 2011), the college continues to face financial difficulties and is currently involved in reconceiving its strategic plan in order to ensure its continuity in the coming years.

Methods

For this study, we conducted a series of 60 personal interviews over a four-week period, with 1 to 5 interviewers present at each interview based on availability. Our interviewees included 29 students representing 24 majors (19 seniors, 4 juniors and 6 sophomores), 22 faculty representing 13 disciplines, and 9 staff (offices included Admissions, Alumni and Parent Relations, Center for Experiential Learning, Marketing and Communications, the Pastor's Office, the President's Office, and the Dean of Students). We requested participation via individually addressed email messages sent to a pool of students, faculty and staff whom we selected for their diversity of academic focus, campus or institutional involvement, and personal experience.

Each interview was between 20 and 60 minutes in length, and was loosely structured by a set of predetermined questions (see Appendix A). These questions focused thematically on personal interpretations of St. Olaf's mission and the value of the liberal arts, the relationship between education and career, and the understood intent and effectiveness of the Main Street Project. Prior to the questions specifically regarding the Main Street Project, each student's interview inquired into the college's value and perceived intentions for that individual. For faculty members, the introductory questions pertained more broadly to the philosophy and practical role of higher education. Staff interviews were more spontaneous in structure and were generally adapted to fit the participants' various roles on campus and involvement with the Main Street Project.

Some bias might have resulted from possible sampling and researcher errors. Due to the limited public availability of information on the Main Street Project, it was difficult for us to provide a concise and objective definition for participants who were unfamiliar with the initiative. Considering the numerous and often very polarized opinions regarding the nature of

the Main Street Project, it is apparent that the manner in which it was framed may have strongly influenced participants' initial impressions. Also, most interviews took place in personal offices or in crowded public spaces. The lack of spatial neutrality or the possibility of being overheard might have affected participants' answers.

Problem and Review of Literature

Mission Statement of St. Olaf College

St. Olaf, a four-year college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, provides an education committed to the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian Gospel, and incorporating a global perspective. In the conviction that life is more than a livelihood, it focuses on what is ultimately worthwhile and fosters the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit.

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. The college intends that its graduates combine academic excellence and theological literacy with a commitment to life-long learning.

St. Olaf College strives to be an inclusive community, respecting all our differing backgrounds and beliefs. Through its curriculum, campus life, and off-campus programs, it stimulates students' critical thinking and heightens their moral sensitivity; it encourages them to be seekers of truth, leading lives of unselfish service to others; and it challenges them to be responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world. (St. Olaf College, 1987)

The Endangered Promises of College

In the past, college was largely considered to be the “synonym to success” (Bruni, 2012), a guaranteed gateway into a comfortable life with a decently paying job and a more-or-less secure lifestyle. Higher education was not only seen as a centerpiece to the American dream and a “reliable engine of social mobility” (Bruni, 2012), but it was also seen as accessible to almost everyone. However, because more people have been going to college in recent decades, the price of college has risen exponentially – upwards of \$40,000 at most residential liberal arts colleges – and college has become a luxury item. Instead of being spoken of as broadly accessible, higher

education has become a key divider between those who can afford higher education and those who cannot. Furthermore, students are increasingly being burdened with rising student loans that they are unable to pay off due to rising unemployment.

Moreover, this luxury item comes with increasingly uncertain returns, as levitating costs and the economic crisis have left graduates unemployed and underemployed at higher and higher rates. College graduates still have an unemployment rate half of that of high school graduates (Bruni, 2012), but data from the Associated Press (2012) states that 53.6% of recent graduates under the age of 25 are currently underemployed – performing work for which their degree is not necessary – or jobless. Leaving students overqualified for menial jobs does not necessarily make a good case for the value of higher education in today's world. Rather than necessarily providing higher salaries for graduates, as in the past, college is actually leaving them more indebted and financially burdened than in previous decades.

In response to this disheartening trend, there has been a return to the development of vocational and technical skills in education in recent decades. Large scale educational reforms were undertaken in the 1980s in response to anxieties regarding the United States' declining competitiveness in the international market, relatively poor performance of U.S. students on standardized testing, and complaints from business leaders about the lack of technical skills of high school graduates entering the workforce (Gale Encyclopedia). Multiple legislative acts, such as the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1998, have attempted to provide states with more resources and funding to support vocational and technical training through work-based study and other methods. This discourse has permeated conversations in higher education circles as well. Citing data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Wessel (2012) noted: "Thirty years

ago, the U.S. led the world in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with the equivalent of at least a two-year degree; only Canada and Israel were close. As of 2009, the U.S. lagged behind 14 other developed countries.” The declining global competitiveness of U.S. graduates has led to a more critical national discourse about the purpose of higher education.

The Vocational and the Liberal: Mutually Exclusive or Mutually Dependent?

The purposes of higher education in general, and of university education in particular, have long been subject to controversy. While some argue that the main role of universities is to provide professional and vocational education and training for the purpose of obtaining a career, others argue in favor of liberal development and the promotion of certain intrinsically worthwhile qualities of mind and intellect (Carr, 2009). For example, the mission statement of St. Olaf College (1987) above establishes the College’s commitment to lifelong learning, as well as its intentions to encourage its students to be “seekers of truth,” to stimulate their critical thinking, to heighten their moral sensitivity, to lead lives “of unselfish service to others,” and to challenge them to be “responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world.” In short, St. Olaf seeks to foster the development of “the whole person in mind, body, and spirit.” Surely these are qualities of mind and intellect that liberal arts colleges attempt to inculcate into their graduates and integrate into their curricula.

There can often be friction between what seem like two camps of higher education, one that focuses on the acquisition of technical skills for the purposes of a career, and another that produces “whole person[s]” (St. Olaf College, 1987) that are prepared for a wide range of jobs, but whose education does not always lead them directly to a career. Although not directly funneled into a particular career, liberal arts schools argue that their students are suited for many

different types of jobs in a market that is constantly in flux. They are equipped with the critical thinking, creativity, and flexibility required for success in a wide range of jobs through lifelong learning. The question is, can these two camps unite? How can the liberal arts education at schools like St. Olaf College produce graduates that are prepared for life after college, capable of articulating these skills, and able to discern how they can best contribute them to the world? Much of the recent literature on higher education has discussed this dilemma, attempting to reaffirm the practical uses of the liberal arts education. For example, Carr (2009) argues for a rebirth of the liberal dimensions and aspirations of university education in an attempt to revitalize what seem like disappearing liberal arts values amidst the vocational agendas of many universities.

Grubb (2005) discusses the roots of this dilemma by examining the shift from occupations rooted in industrial production to occupations associated with knowledge and information. This transformation has driven “work skills in the direction of ‘higher-order’ skills including communications skills, problem solving, and reasoning – the ‘skills of the twenty-first century’” (p. 1). As such, graduates must keep up with advances in technology and expect to change their careers based on the creation of new jobs and new formations of work organization. In other words, they must be able to engage in lifelong learning.

Grubb (2005) summarizes this shift as one from higher education to professional education, characterized by a greater focus on vocationalism. Some dissenters complain that this focus undermines education’s moral, civic and intellectual purposes. Grubb, however, asserts “vocationalism is now so deeply embedded in American higher education that it cannot be wished away and that reforms need to focus on ways to integrate vocational purposes with broader civic, intellectual, and moral goals” (p. 2). Our ethnographic study will attempt to

eradicate the false dichotomy within higher education between the vocational and the liberal, reaffirming the practical value of the liberal arts as it relates to career exploration at St. Olaf College.

The Problem: Justifying the Liberal Arts in a Shifting Economy

Scholarship discusses the value of a liberal arts education in a changing economy. Agresto (2011) argues that the universe of thought and culture living in higher education institutions – the study of the liberal arts, what was once the collegiate norm – has passed away during the last few decades. Although tuition, student housing, and textbook expenses have all increased substantially, Agresto affirms that federal subsidies will continue to support higher education in general.

McPherson (1999) further specifies the demise of the liberal arts college, arguing that liberal arts colleges have been struggling in the last twenty-five years due to the shrinkage of their traditional market, a rising tide of competition from alternative providers of higher education (including for-profit ventures), public skepticism about rising college costs, and pricing policies that are considered to be unfairly redistributive. As a result, liberal arts colleges are becoming increasingly dependent on “four-color brochures, marketing directors, meticulously planned capital campaigns, and elaborate pricing” (McPherson, 1999, p. 47). Orr (1994) establishes that the dangers of education in today’s world are that it tends to focus too much on careers, it is not grounded in an ethical view of the world, it presents disciplines as narrow and parallel, non-intersecting spheres of knowledge, and it all but extinguishes the innate sense of wonder for life.

Cunningham (2002) argues that liberal arts colleges are increasingly dependent on alumni donations at the institutional level, providing ground for the career focus that Orr decries. He argues that the current state of higher education is analogous to an “arms race” (p. 540), one in which “institutions are fighting for rank within the set of all colleges and institutions” (p. 541). Cunningham believes that the principal determinants in this arms race – those that will affect future institutional characteristics – are average alumni donations at the institutional level. As a result, the college president presides over the realities of competitive revenue flows and shrinking endowments, as well as rising parental anxiety over the state of their recently graduated, unemployed children. So-called “helicopter parents” have an increasing role in the college selection process, so marketing strategies among higher education institutions are now obliged to include the “parental shadow” (University Business, 2006) cast over their teen demographic.

The 20s are increasingly seen as a liminal stage between adolescence and adulthood. Job switching is common, and with it, periods of voluntary, transitional unemployment. In this recession, the term *funemployment* has come to be understood as this period of carefree self-exploration, delaying the entrance into adulthood responsibility (Peck, 2010). Some youth note that since joblessness has now become common among their peers, it has lost some of its stigma, and that they are still flexible because they do not have mortgages or children. However, the situation is such that higher education institutions are rethinking their role in supporting and aiding their graduates to navigate the increasingly uncertain years after graduation.

Roach (2006) describes the new emphasis on corporate recruiting through university career development initiatives as an effort to tap universities for diverse talent. Although primarily speaking of ethnic and gender diversity, Roach opens the door to rethinking diversity

in the university system. Our paper explores the possibility that this diverse talent can also be found among liberal arts graduates that have a broad-based education that equips them with critical thinking, communication, and adaptability to a changing market. In response to criticism of corporatization of the university, Steck (2003) argues that it is the faculty's role to continue to protect traditional academic values amidst the corporatization of the U.S. university.

The Response: The Main Street Initiative at St. Olaf College

President David Anderson of St. Olaf College has responded to parents' increasing anxiety over the price tag of a liberal arts education and the reality of unemployment among young graduates by publishing online data about alumni delineating their area of study and income. According to a Star Tribune Article interviewing President Anderson, publishing detailed job and salary information online is an effort to defend the value of a liberal arts education in the 21st century, emphasizing that if a St. Olaf education only prepared graduates for the years immediately after graduation, they would quickly be "unemployed and irrelevant" (Ross, 2012).

The article also points out that a 2011 Gallup poll reveals that half of those surveyed believe the main reason to seek higher education is to "earn more money" while about a third picked to "get a good job." What about the classic liberal arts goals of becoming a better citizen and learning how to learn? Just 5 percent of those surveyed said, "to become a well-rounded person" and only one percent answered, "to learn to think critically" (Ross, 2012). This poll brings into question the value of the classic liberal arts as it comes into tension with career and vocational planning for liberal arts graduates. Our ethnographic study attempts to explore this

area, specifically the purpose of the liberal arts notion of lifelong learning, adaptability to the job market, and the creation of new fields, not just for making a livelihood.

St. Olaf College is responding directly to these issues through the “St. Olaf College Main Street Initiative” (St. Olaf College, 2010a), which determined that “‘preparation for life after college’ means having a map for the future that derives from students’ discernment of their gifts, talents and passions; that has realistic ‘next steps’; that enables new graduates to support themselves; and that can respond to their evolving interests, strengths and life situations as the decades pass” (St. Olaf College, 2012). Part of the Main Street Project was the symbolically constructed Tomson Hall, with the Admissions Department on one side, classrooms in the middle, and the Center for Experiential Learning (soon to be the Center for Vocation and Career) at the end. It also houses most of the administrative offices of the College, including the President’s Office, along with some academic departments. This intentional layout invokes images of students passing through their four years at St. Olaf, beginning with Admissions as incoming first-years and exiting through the career center and hopefully landing a post-graduate job. The five main objectives of the Project are:

- 1) The Main Street Initiative will strongly support the goals and aspirations stated in St. Olaf’s Mission Statement;
- 2) The Main Street Initiative will support the identity of St. Olaf College as a nationally ranked, highly selective undergraduate liberal arts college in the Lutheran tradition;
- 3) The faculty and staff of the College will provide guidance and assistance as students gather and organize information, perspectives, and personal insights from curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular experiences to help them make clear, informed, and

deliberate decisions about who they are, who they want to become, and the work they hope to do in the world;

4) Because good ideas need and deserve support, the College will seek resources where necessary to support this project;

5) The goals and program elements of the Main Street Initiative will be communicated in a clear, compelling way to current students, prospective students, parents, faculty, academic staff, alumni, donors, and other friends of the College. (St. Olaf College, 2010b)

Our study attempts to examine if these objectives are being met by the Project through ethnographic evidence gathered from students, faculty, and staff. We do not undertake a program evaluation of the Project, but instead provide perspectives and insights about how it is being achieved and communicated on campus.

The Center for Experiential Learning is soon to be succeeded by the Center for Vocation and Career (CVC), whose founding director will report to the President. According to the document seeking to hire the founding CVC Director, the new name “makes a change in emphasis while signaling the college’s ongoing commitment to be an innovator for liberal arts higher education” (St. Olaf College, 2012a). It clearly establishes the CVC as the college office charged with providing students “resources and experiences to build their skills awareness, guide their career planning and hone their self-advocacy” (St. Olaf College, 2012a). The document states that the College has had a longstanding interest, as a college of the Lutheran church, in helping students with vocational discernment, an objective that is consonant with the liberal arts curriculum. Attempting to distinguish itself from other liberal arts institutions, it establishes: “No liberal arts college has more concretely confirmed the centrality of career services to its

institutional identity and mission” (St. Olaf College, 2012a). Part of our research examines if this new institutional focus on career services is compatible with the mission statement of the College.

Is it Working?

Our study intends to examine St. Olaf’s Main Street Initiative and perceptions of the Project among students, faculty and staff. We sought to answer some questions raised in the literature as they relate to St. Olaf College in particular. We studied the role of the Main Street Project on campus as it relates to postgraduate output, as well as how closely the interviewees perceived the Project to be following the College’s concise yet challenging Mission Statement.

What is the role of higher education, and more specifically, the liberal arts model used at St. Olaf, in today’s world? How does the Mission Statement, which emphasizes that our lives are “more than a livelihood” (St. Olaf College, 1987) relate to the College’s recent institutional focus on career planning? What do people know about the Main Street Project, and how is it perceived and communicated on campus? What does “unselfish service to others” (St. Olaf College, 1987) mean in today’s world – can the definition be broadened from simply volunteering to serving through one’s vocation or career? We also wanted to examine if the career planning aspect – mainly a response to increased unemployment and rising student loans among recent graduates, as discussed in the literature – is compatible with the values expressed in the mission statement.

Our findings will shed light on this extremely pertinent and far-reaching issue amidst the crisis in higher education, as well as provide suggestions for how the Main Street Project could better achieve or communicate its objectives to the St. Olaf community, both on and off the Hill.

Findings and Analysis – Students

Student Perceptions on the Purpose of Higher Education

Across the variety of majors, class years, and the overall student cohort of this study, the perceptions on the purpose of higher education vary greatly. Out of the 29 students whom we interviewed, the majority responded that the purpose of higher education is to learn how to give back to society. The students expressed this in a variety of ways, including: “learn how to become civically engaged with the local community,” “learn how to become participating members of society,” “learn how to help others,” and ultimately “be able to give back to society.” These students tended to expand on specific experiences of civic engagement, volunteer, or internship opportunities. Close behind this response, is the perception that “getting a job” or “finding a vocation or career” is the most necessary purpose of higher education. The majority of these students generally did not specify certain types of jobs, but instead focused on skills necessary for entering the workplace.

A good number of other students responded that gaining and recognizing specific skill sets is specifically pertinent to a college education. Many students believe that gaining general knowledge, learning how to interact in the world outside of college, and being able to recognize personal skills are important to receive out of their higher education. One student described such skills as “critical skills, such as public speaking, journalistic writing, the art of persuasion, using social media, organization, using art to explain an issue, using emotions, discussion skills, listening skills, and analyzing discourses and media.” The students suggest that these skills are perhaps even more relevant in today’s society than ever before.

Student Perceptions on the Importance of the Liberal Arts and a St. Olaf Education

Student after student repeated that one of the greatest attributes of a liberal arts college such as St. Olaf is the interconnectedness across academic disciplines. Almost every student mentioned a great appreciation for the interdisciplinary education St. Olaf encourages, especially through general education requirements (GEs) outside of their major. Furthermore, students frequently repeated the belief that a liberal arts education fosters well-rounded citizens who can converse with others and feel comfortable in various and diverse settings. One student explains, “Liberal arts helps dispel ignorance. It exposes you to different ideas and different kinds of study and it makes it harder to completely rule out other conflicting ideas.”

Other significant and repeated opinions regarded the value and appreciation of a community that a small liberal arts college fosters, as well as a focus on service and civic engagement. One student accurately sums up the shared value St. Olaf students seem to have of service: “service learning is important regardless of major or career goal. It is an important part of living in a society. The Lutheran aspect of the College encourages this, as do [Academic Civic Engagement] courses, Leaders for Social Change, and Community Scholars.” Service and civic engagement seem to be necessary components of education for many St. Olaf students.

Other important, although less frequently voiced, aspects of a St. Olaf education for students were to become “thinkers,” prepare for the “real world,” prepare for a job, or continue on a family legacy at St. Olaf. Although students less frequently made these statements, they nonetheless are necessary components students seek out in a liberal arts education.

Parent Opinions on a St. Olaf Education

Another interesting yet notable finding of this study is the shared trust and belief parents have in the liberal arts. The great majority of students interviewed said that their parents were

supportive in their choice to go to a liberal arts college because they trusted the education the student would receive. A few other students expressed that their parents either went to St. Olaf, or went to a similar liberal arts institution. However, there were a significant number of students who described their parents as skeptical of their college choice, yet trusted the student to make a responsible decision. While no student said that their parents blatantly rejected their college choice, it is still apparent that skepticism exists about the value of a liberal arts college.

Student Understanding of the College's Mission Statement

When asked what students understand of the College's mission statement, almost every student attempted to remember and repeat the three "pillars" of the College: an education "committed to the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian Gospel, and incorporating a global perspective" (St. Olaf College, 1987). However, each individual student, whether they had memorized the mission statement or not, seemed to hold one or two specific aspects to be important and critical for the college.

The majority of students expressed an appreciation for the incorporation of global citizenship and service within the mission statement. The phrase "A life of worth and service" frequently surfaced in students' explanations of their experiences and hopes for their St. Olaf education, although this phrase is not explicitly stated in the mission statement, but instead stems from the Lilly Vocational Grant. One student explains that she likes "the focus on depth, breadth, and coherence, a theme found throughout the mission statement. It's nice to see that written out explicitly and published by the college. That's kinda why I went to Olaf." Other aspects of the mission statement that students seem to value are the commitment to fostering community and

the drive to turn ideals into action. The phrase, “Ideals to Action” is not actually in the mission statement, but was formerly a byline of the College.

Some students are skeptical, however, that St. Olaf fulfills its mission. One student explains that to him, the mission statement “sounds pretty, but at the same time, it seems kind of cheap. Learning how to be a global citizen is not just about studying abroad... and as for ‘Ideals to Action,’ it’s hard to say. It’s almost on a person-to-person basis. For those who *want* to do it, it works well. As a school-wide mantra, it’s doesn’t really make sense.” Although these opinions surfaced only a few times during student interviews, they still are important and valid opinions to be addressed. A few other students interviewed held similar views of the mission statement, expressing skepticism about St. Olaf’s expressed values becoming operative, or put into action. Students wonder, is St. Olaf, as an institution, really following through with transforming its ideals into actions?

Also notable is the small, yet significant, amount of students who explained that they either had never read the mission statement, or didn’t know anything about it. This made these particular students wonder if they should have read (or should read, depending on class year) the mission statement, if knowing it would make their St. Olaf experience different or meaningful. This interview question prompted students to connect the expressed mission of the college with their daily activities, classes, and extracurriculars.

Student Impressions of the Main Street Project

Twenty-one out of the twenty-nine students that were interviewed said that they were uncertain about the details and mission of the Main Street Project. Five out of those twenty-one had never even heard of the Main Street Project on campus. Out of the sixteen uncertain

students, all expressed skepticism, anxiety, and sometimes anger about the few things they had heard or seen regarding the Project. The majority of these students expressed fear of an underlying “corporate focus” of the Project; that the Project would become a “processing plant” for students, and that the College would begin to stray away from the liberal arts and service values expressed in the College’s mission statement.

Although some of these views are extreme, there is legitimate and serious concern among students about the goals and mission of the Project. One student stated, “[The Main Street Project] is focused more on career, and that worries me a bit. It’s the opposite of how I see liberal arts. I understand that it’s marketable with the economy right now to have the resources available to help students, but I don’t think that that should be the focus.” A few interviewed students recognized the unique situation of the current economy and the difficulty our cohort will have in finding a job. For these students, however, over-focusing on careers while in college strays from the purpose of a liberal arts experience. As stated above, the purpose of higher education for many students is exploring service, civic engagement, conversation with others, and interconnecting ideas and experiences across disciplines.

Student notions of the Main Street Project as a “processing plant,” have especially surfaced in light of the recent construction of Tomson Hall on campus. Students have noticed the intentional layout of Tomson Hall – Admissions on one side, classrooms in the middle, and the Center for Experiential Learning (soon to be the Center for Vocation and Career) at the end. The principle hallway that runs through the building is titled the “Main Street,” with large photos along the wall of students doing various activities throughout the seasons of St. Olaf. One interviewed student expressed that the “‘Main Street’ seems like a manufacturing plant. It takes away the creativity and initiative of the student to do things on their own. It simplifies a very

complex experience. Basically, it's like a processing plant. It's sort of like a 'helicopter college.'" Multiple students expressed similar anxieties about the Project. The "Main Street" seems to hinder, rather than support various education tracks, students say. It has become a "helicopter college" in the sense that the Project seems to have certain career paths in mind for students, and it will hover over the student until he or she gets through college, lands a specific career, and moves on to the so-called "real world." One student asked, "The name '*Main Street* Project' isn't particularly inspiring, is it?"

Moreover, almost every interviewed student mentioned the recent changes in the St. Olaf website's front-page stories. Students saw multiple consecutive stories about other students landing jobs at Target, Best Buy, or other large corporations, and fewer stories about students doing service or volunteer work. Many interpreted this to be a message from the St. Olaf Administration. One student explained, "The homepage is what the Administration wants to project and what it deems worthy for parents and alumni to learn about. The Administration values its image and appearance." This student, as well as a few other students, suggested that the Administration is more concerned about parent and alumni opinions of the college than the opinions of current students. The student pointed out that current students are the ones visiting the St. Olaf homepage most frequently – it is the default home page for every school computer and students get on the website multiple times a day to get to email, Moodle, Student Information Systems, and more. This student later added, "I admit, however, that the Administration has to make sure we have the money that allows the school to operate." She recognizes the tricky balance between considering external viewers of the website (parents, alumni, prospective students, and potential donors) and internal viewers (current students).

The other eight of the twenty-nine interviewed students had slightly different, more optimistic and balanced opinions. These students see how the Main Street Project has the potential to be valuable for the College. Students expressed that there are general anxieties about finding a job after college, especially in the current state of the U.S. economy, a problem with which they expect assistance from St. Olaf. Furthermore, some students express that the College is attempting to inform students about St. Olaf's own economy. One student stated, "I believe the overall goal of the Main Street Project is to raise awareness of our students in business and finance and raise the school's endowment by getting money from companies that employ business/corporate students." This general awareness would allow students to see, in this student's opinion, the importance of a project like Main Street.

Although the majority of students expressed general skepticism and pessimism concerning the Main Street Project, many recognize that they are generally uninformed about the Project, perhaps leading to misguided interpretations. One student admitted, "My negative perception of the Main Street Project is possibly not grounded in what it is actually about." It is not that all of these students are completely uninformed about the Main Street Project. Some of the interviewed students were tour guides, members of Senate, and student employees of the Center for Experiential Learning – all students that would be involved with implementation of the Project. However, what is most clear is that *all* students don't fully understand what the Main Street Project and its goals are. This is due, students say, to an overall lack of public, accessible information on the Project. One student expressed, "My impression is the President is also not looking for student input." Students seem to agree that they would appreciate more involvement in the creation and implementation of this project, especially, they say, because it is ultimately about their future plans, and not those of parents, alumni, or current donors.

Student Perceptions on Career Choices at St. Olaf

We also asked students if St. Olaf offers equal opportunities for all career choices. Unfortunately, only three students responded that St. Olaf encourages and advocates all career, service, and vocation paths equally. These three students said this was due to the CEL, explaining that the CEL staff and Peer Advisors will help any student who comes in for any reason or prospect. The rest of the students, however, had varying opinions about both which career choices St. Olaf advocates, and which St. Olaf neglects. Many students simply stated that there does not seem to be an equal balance among the types of jobs that St. Olaf promotes to its students. Many students said that St. Olaf offers more options for corporate job seekers, especially in light of the Main Street Project. Other students said St. Olaf offers too many service opportunities. Some students even said that St. Olaf offers *only* service *or* corporate opportunities, and nothing in between. Furthermore, multiple students said St. Olaf only offers opportunities for science and music majors.

The seemingly skewed judgment on this subject perhaps can be traced to the polarization that has been caused through the development of the Main Street Project. In reflecting on the Project, most students either sided with the notion of “service” and “social change” or sided with the notion of “career,” but failed to find a middle, common, or integrated ground. This cannot only blind students in recognizing the variety of options on campus, but it can also create polarization among students. This topic will be discussed in more detail in the Summary and Important Findings section of this paper.

Students’ Shifting Educational Expectations while at St. Olaf

Students, especially juniors and seniors, were asked to reflect on their own shifting expectations of their education throughout their two, three, or four years at St. Olaf. Only one student stated that his expectations for his future have not changed since his first year at St. Olaf. A couple more students said their expectations have stayed mostly the same, but are slightly altered due to classes, faculty, internships, extracurriculars, and/or jobs.

The vast majority of students, however, replied that their expectations for their own post-graduate direction have changed significantly due to a number of reasons. The most common reason for shifted expectations has been due to faculty encouragement and guidance. Students state that specific faculty have been fundamental in formulating their own interests and outlook on the world. Next, a significant number of students stated that they now see “service” as being a critical part of their future, whereas when they first came to St. Olaf, that was not necessarily the case. Experiences and internships both through and outside of classes during their college career have influenced these changes in expectations. Furthermore, a few students declared that their future plans have changed direction due to acquiring an overall broader perspective of the world, specifically through recognition of their societal privilege. Lastly, a few students said their expectations of education have changed due to a greater sense of confidence they have gained at St. Olaf. These students feel more confident in their skills, and thus more prepared, able, and ready for post-graduate life.

The students who spoke of a change in perception due to an internship, civic engagement, or a non-academic experience, usually attributed this to the Center for Experiential Learning. These students felt that they not only gained broader skills through these experiences, but also gained greater confidence in working with others. Many students also said that they have developed a passion for service and community through these experiences.

All of the interviewed students have been into the CEL at least once. More than half had been in multiple times, usually more than three times during their time at St. Olaf thus far. This could be slightly skewed due to the greater amount of seniors interviewed. Some students, however, had only been into the CEL once or twice for specific job, internship, resume, or practice interview help. The vast majority of the interviewed students reflected on these visits as having been very useful. Many students specifically attributed the success of their visits to the Peer Advisors, career counselors, and those involved in civic engagement and social innovation.

Findings and Analysis – Faculty

Faculty Perceptions on Higher Education and the Liberal Arts

Faculty often framed their thinking on the purpose of higher education and the practical value of the liberal arts around what its students get out of education and how society benefits as well. In many ways, faculty thoughts on higher education, the liberal arts, and what they hope students gain from the St. Olaf experience overlap and influence one another.

In terms of higher education's purpose, faculty described it as a good for people's lives in general terms. As one professor noted, higher education "helps individuals live fuller, more rewarding lives that are more complete." Moreover, it aids students in being good and productive citizens that can participate and add value to debate, discussion, and civic participation. As a member of society, you are weighted with civic responsibilities and higher education serves to "create citizens that can participate in public conversations using carefully considered evidence and engaging with often disagreeing viewpoints." As a final point of practicality, higher education was noted to create economic vitality. As stated by various faculty members, higher education allows for students to "enter the workforce with creativity and hard work, prepared to

change jobs during their lifetime.” In other words, higher education is a place to gain skills that are applicable and transferable across jobs and careers.

The important aspects of the liberal arts were consistent among faculty across academic disciplines. Faculty saw the liberal arts education as an opportunity to not only learn more about one’s self, but also to learn more about others. As one professor put it simply, the liberal arts allows for an “enhanced understanding of one’s self and what one wants out of life.” A high degree of self-awareness about the skills that a student possesses and confidence in those very skills are important qualities that professors hoped students would get out of their St. Olaf experience.

Moreover, the liberal arts provides an “appreciation of the breadth of other’s experiences.” Many faculty members believe that learning more about the world and gaining exposure to a multiplicity of diverse perspectives is a valuable component of the St. Olaf experience. One professor said that he hoped St. Olaf would enable students to “make connections with the world rather than having an exclusively inward focus.” He continued on, in echoing the sentiment of many others, by saying, “in thinking about connections, the main priority is helping and supporting others.” In this way, one of the primary aspects of the St. Olaf liberal arts experience from many faculty perspectives is that students develop a responsibility of care for other people.

Faculty Perceptions on the Connections between the Liberal Arts and Jobs

Looking at the liberal arts and the education St. Olaf provides in connection with the post-graduate expectations, one faculty member asserted, “every major should be expected to stress a sense of public service. I don’t think it should be too narrow or tight minded. I don’t

think departments should guarantee that students can get a job in their specific subject matter directly after college. Students should think, how can their education be useful in a wider sense?” Indeed, most professors repeated many of the same skills they believe liberal artists and most Oles graduate with that should serve them well in any job: the ability to think critically and analytically, openness to difference and a variety of opportunity, flexibility, communication skills (e.g. reading, writing, listening, speaking/presenting), leadership, general knowledge, and problem solving.

When explicitly asked about the relationship between the liberal arts and getting a job, most professors admitted that there is not really a direct connection. They believe that the primary purpose of the liberal arts is not necessarily to get a job, but it at least “ought to prepare you for a *satisfying* job.” In contrast to getting a student a high-paying job, the liberal arts is about broadening students’ minds. One leaves, however, with a number of transferable and flexible skills, as previously referenced. But many professors also mentioned that the most important thing that students should leave St. Olaf with is a sense of ethics and morals, so that they can then apply that sense to any job or career.

Faculty Understanding of the College’s Mission Statement

As a first line of response, nearly every professor said they believe every aspect of the mission statement to be important. Indeed, all cherish the unique blend of “an education committed to the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian Gospel, and incorporating a global perspective.” One professor felt that the nature of the college’s mission statement is that you cannot truly tease them apart when you view the liberal arts education as making people well-rounded and whole. Among faculty, however, the simple difference remained that the different

aspects of the mission statement spoke to people in individually meaningful ways, and reflected what they deemed to be critically important regarding the College's mission.

Several professors believed the aspect of global citizenship to be the most important. In their eyes, the essential value of a global perspective is not simply about studying abroad, but rather "about being able to relate to people and find common ground and common knowledge with others." This speaks to the previously iterated value of a multiplicity of perspectives that St. Olaf students stand to gain from their education on the Hill.

The majority of faculty members stated that the school's mission of encouraging students to live lives of worth and service resonates the most with them. It was often connected in their explanation of its value to the mission statement as well, such as the college being rooted in the Christian gospel, which many explained as teaching from a value-based perspective, or the conviction that life is more than a livelihood, which carried a significant level of meaning for multiple faculty members. As one professor described it, "living lives of worth and service is the most important and the most uncomfortable part of the mission. We need to understand what a servant heart is. We should make a living, but serve others." For several members of the faculty, this means students should leave St. Olaf with an understanding of vocation, and how to discern what their vocation might be. Interestingly, many faculty members believe that both giving students a sense of vocation and the phrase "lives of worth and service" are in the mission statement, but in reality vocation is not explicitly stated and "lives of worth and service" stems from the now defunct Lilly Vocational Grant program.

Many professors connected vocation to a sense of global citizenship and service learning, which are alluded to in the mission statement where it states the college will encourage students "to be seekers of truth, leading lives of unselfish service to others; and it challenges them to be

responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world” (St. Olaf College, 1987). In their minds, this means an obligation for students to improve the world, broaden their focus, and become engaged citizens who make connections with the rest of the world in order to gain a better understanding of truth. According to one professor, the relationship to post-graduate employment lies in students learning the usefulness of considering employment, vocation, and calling “in order to become agents of positive change.” In his mind, it translates to a life of service after college, which he believes is a “major dimension of St. Olaf students.”

Faculty Impressions of the Main Street Project

Despite the importance the President has placed on the Main Street Project, the majority of faculty, including many on the Steering Committee or others who are members of various subcommittees, could not give a concise explanation of the Main Street Project’s purpose and goals. Most professors agreed that the Project has not been fully explained to them; they are only aware of bits and pieces that they have to make sense of on their own. The most succinct explanation we received was from one professor who stated that the Project is “concerned with talking about skills for jobs,” whereas other professors could only point to its development in a time of economic crisis and that it must be evolving and not yet completed. Overall, the feeling is that a clear summary of intended outcomes for students and the college has been lacking.

Many faculty members have been involved in conversations with students or other members of the College concerning the Main Street Project and pieced together what they believed to be various pros and cons of the Project. In terms of Main Street’s value, most faculty boiled it down to it encouraging the college community to think about St. Olaf education not ending at graduation. As one professor stated, the Project seeks “to help students in transition

from St. Olaf to whatever is coming next, and wants to let students know the opportunities available.” Professors believe it is valuable for Main Street to help students become more intentional about their long-term goals, and provide resources to achieve those goals. Indeed, many faculty could only speak positively about several dimensions of post-graduate discernment that Main Street promotes, such as connecting with alumni, externships, effectively used interims, and job shadowing.

Although many faculty found value in the Main Street Project, they also identified a number of anxieties and tensions that surround the Project. The most frequently mentioned critique was that the St. Olaf community is not in agreement on the nature of the Main Street Project. Faculty members pointed toward a lack of campus debate or discussion on what an initiative geared toward connecting a student’s education and his/her post-graduate life would look like. Instead, there has been a poorly disseminated, top-down approach which students and faculty are forced to accept. Moreover, one professor characterized the lack of campus discussion and the implementation of a top-down approach by the administration as a “presumptiveness in thinking [the Administration] knows what is best for students.” In other words, the Main Street Project lacks the input of a wide range of students and faculty, and there has not been a forum to voice critiques and air concerns.

A further anxiety shared by many professors is the Main Street Project’s potential to reduce education into terms of job prospects. According to one faculty member, the Main Street Project represents “a misguided attempt to focus the college’s thinking too narrowly on preparing students for jobs.” Such a move distorts the purpose of the institution and the focus it should have on educating the “whole person” (St. Olaf College, 1987), which is lost in a narrow focus on jobs and career planning. It is not that professors do not want students to be gainfully

employed after they graduate, but rather that the Project focuses post-graduate placement on private sector job procurement at the exclusion of other jobs or opportunities.

A number of professors cite the college's decision to publish data based on graduates' job placements and salaries as an example of the liberal arts education being viewed in terms of its cash value. Faculty fear that majors will be ranked and chosen according to an overemphasis on how much a student can earn through a particular major. There is the potential that St. Olaf will "create a two-tiered set of graduates to the detriment of the community," namely, those graduates who have well-compensated employment, and those who do not. What the St. Olaf community is left with is an undesirable situation where the student body is divided and parents and alumni are given unreasonable expectations of graduates in terms of future earnings.

Furthermore, a strong emphasis on the financial aspect of particular majors and a narrow focus on jobs threaten the path of self-discovery that is inherent in a liberal arts education. Professors do admit that reflecting on career paths after college is part and parcel of exploring identity, but what the Main Street Project is doing is putting a monetary value on education. As one faculty member stated, even though education costs money, the liberal arts should be thought of "not as a commodity, but as shaping and living one's life." This thought connects to what many professors feel is lacking from the Main Street Project, which is a broader understanding and approach to vocation.

A number of faculty believe that students cannot go through four years of college and know what their life is going to be like for certain after they graduate. For example, one professor would like to see more advertising of students who do something different from their major, and who are open to serendipity, because students cannot always anticipate how their interests and personal circumstances will change after graduation. From their observations and

interactions with students, many faculty believe the Main Street Project has the unfortunate effect of increasing pressure for students to get a job that defines their path after graduation. Most faculty believe that it actually takes at least a few years after graduation for students to discern a more defined path for themselves. A further source of tension resulting from the Project is that students are seeing courses in terms of how their courses will lead to employment, which one professor in particular stated is a menacing prospect for the humanities, given that it is more open-ended and not tied to particular fields, as math, science, and music might be.

Overall, most of the faculty members that we talked with believe that it is incumbent upon members of the college community to push students to think about and prepare for life after the Hill, but the Main Street Project is making students look at their education and think, “What do I get out of this?” instead of more importantly asking, “How is this changing my life?”

Findings and Analysis – Staff

Staff Perceptions on Higher Education and St. Olaf

In agreement with both students and faculty, several staff members believe one main purpose of higher education is to “learn about the world and other people for the sake of community.” Staff say higher education should function as a “broad training” for life after college. This training should enable students to think broadly, become “citizens of the world,” and do meaningful, purposeful work. One staff member explains that this broad training can “equip people with the skills and knowledge to be a contributing citizen to a larger community.” This type of learning, a staff member notes, also leads to critical identity development and self-exploration that can allow a person to be more confident in approaching work of any form.

Furthermore, most staff state that higher education prepares people for future learning and for integration into the work world. Many staff members, however, don't just limit "work" to a "9-5" job, but also expand it to encompass work in terms of how a student interacts with people and works within a community. Within higher education, one staff member states, students can gain necessary experience and greater preparation for future jobs, as well as more experience overall.

When asked what staff hoped for students to get out of their St. Olaf education specifically, many immediately answered, "I hope they learn information about the world." Similar to the perception regarding higher education in general, the majority of the interviewed staff members believe that it is essential for students to be able to communicate to a wide audience and to "have enough of a background that they could do a number of things." A few specific staff members assert that confidence in communication cannot happen until students learn "self-awareness" as well as awareness of the world around them. One staff member stated, "I hope they gain concrete knowledge of the systems of the world into which they are entering, in addition to knowledge about themselves and where they fit into these systems." With knowledge of both themselves as well as broader systems, students can then "grow into leaders and change agents who can make ethical and technical decisions."

One or two staff, however, state that there is really "nothing distinctive about higher education. Education has a purpose, period. It is to credential you and see that you have a set of skills." For some staff, the main purpose of higher education, and specifically a St. Olaf education, is to see "that a person comes out with something marketable." Having specific credentials and sets of skills makes a student more marketable, and thus, according to various staff, more able and ready to enter into post-graduate life in the current economy.

Staff Perceptions on the Importance and “Practical Value” of the Liberal Arts

For most staff, the purpose of a liberal arts education is to encourage students “to be able to think, and not in narrow ways.” The liberal arts system is a “good foundation” to teach students how to think critically, to be critical, and to be well-rounded. Almost all of the interviewed staff believe that the interdisciplinary experience provided by the liberal arts is “purposefully broad in its approach” to foster students’ thinking, understanding, empathizing, leading, and innovating. One staff member states, “Being able to see things from many perspectives is huge because it makes one more flexible and adaptable, in terms of personality as well as skills and ideas.” Staff members see understanding, flexibility, and adaptability as not only pertinent to approaching the world and world issues in the twenty-first century, but also useful in potential future workplaces.

The majority of staff believe that a liberal arts education has great potential to leading smoothly and successfully into a job, vocation, or future career. One staff member says that a liberal arts education “can teach you to be flexible and have fall back options. A particular major doesn’t box you into particular field.” The beauty of liberal arts, one staff member explains, is that students do not just come out of this college with a major, but they also come out with a wide variety of transferable skills. This education “forces students to hone critical thinking skills, writing, speaking, and four years of idea development.” This is not always true for students graduating from larger universities or technical colleges, where the education is more narrowed and focused on one specific path. A few staff, however, point out that students need to recognize and be confident in these skills in order to sell them. One staff person says, “If students with a liberal arts background understand some of the underlying skills they’ve learned, employers will

see that as a very positive thing.” As stated earlier, many learned skills throughout a liberal arts St. Olaf education are applicable and transferable to both the work world and beyond, but only if students recognize and can articulate them clearly and confidently.

Staff Understanding of the College’s Mission Statement

The various staff interpretations and understandings of the college’s mission statement are very similar to those of both students and faculty. The majority of the staff find the mission statement to be “very comprehensive” and effective, or at least hope it to be, in pushing the liberal arts to be both inclusive of global perspectives as well as the Lutheran tradition. Although staff recognize the presence and importance of religious diversity on campus, many believe being “rooted in the Christian gospel” allows the institution to “ground us in language of faith, compassion, mercy, and community.” A few staff interpret this “grounding” to effectively teach students to strive for excellence, to not be afraid of the world, and “to be prepared to do what we must,” in any shape or size.

Furthermore, a few staff emphasized the necessity of both the college and its mission statement to be “good at being adaptable.” One staff summarizes for many: “It is important that the mission statement gets interpreted according to where the student is and how the world is and where those meet.” This calls for an inclusive and far-reaching mission statement, a few staff explain, that cannot limit the College and that can be adaptable to the current world. The majority, if not all, of the staff believe the mission statement does a good job of working toward this, but that there is always room for reinterpretation.

Staff Impressions of the Main Street Project’s Goals and Value

Staff members had a fairly consistent perception of the intended goals of the Main Street Project. For many, the Project is a way to rethink how the College approaches helping students prepare for post-graduate life. As one staff member states, the Main Street Project “does not want students to focus on their final destination, as much as it wants students to begin thinking about their future path.” To a great extent, this reflects the shift in the economy in the past few years, as well as data gathered from research into what students say about their experience, confidence level, and abilities coming out of St. Olaf. A particular staff member said that she understands the Project in terms of “data, research, and outcomes” to deal with students who seem to have lower confidence in their abilities than at other schools. The Main Street Project’s goal, then, as many staff persons indicate, is to increase students’ confidence through skill building and a self-awareness that stems from asking not just “Who am I,” but “How do I put together a life?”

Although they might be aware of what they believe to be some of Main Street’s goals, most staff admit that they do not really know what the state of the Project is currently. Most attribute this to a communication gap between the President’s office, which is behind the Project, and the rest of campus concerning Main Street’s future effect and concrete initiatives. A couple of staff share the perception that “there are high hopes and big intentions for [the Main Street Project], but nothing is quite organized to market a full, succinct plan for it.” Many other staff members recognize this, and quite a few attribute the problem to the lack of a director for the rebranded Center for Vocation and Career (formerly the Center for Experiential Learning). They believe the new director will make the Project clearer, as he/she steps into the management position.

In absence of a complete and transparent roll-out of the Main Street Project, many staff members can still clearly point to a number of valuable aspects of the Project. For example, one staff person explained that as a result of the Project “students are more aware earlier that they could think about what to do after college before they’re a senior.” This owes in part to the capitalization of, or increased availability to, various resources, such as the alumni network, jobs, internships in alumni world, vocational training, and other such opportunities. But also, as a number of staff people remarked, the new central location for the Center for Experiential Learning plays a part, given that it is more accessible and visible. Overall, many staff members believe that Main Street has created conditions such that students are less timid about receiving help than they were previously.

Anxieties and Tensions Surrounding the Main Street Project

Though most, if not all, of the staff with whom we spoke believe the general goals of the Main Street Project to be valuable and can identify improvements that the Project has brought to campus, they still express a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety about the Project. One concern repeatedly mentioned is that with the Administration’s plan to publish data on the jobs and salaries of recent graduates, there is potential to quantify the undergraduate experience. For example, a student or parent might be overly concerned with how much money he/she can make with a sociology degree. As one staff member argued, there is reason to be concerned “when those numbers are used to define grads and the work that we’re doing” in getting students to think about their path after graduation.

This relates to what many staff believe the Administration is communicating through the Main Street Project, which is that there appears to be a hierarchy of what is a “good job” once

you leave campus. As a result, some staff reported that “the value of being able to do years of service or non-profit work or a gap year or an entry level job isn’t seen as ‘fitting’ or ‘valued’ as a for-profit career.” Several staff members pointed to how the Administration seems to be focused on producing material on corporate positions, such as through stories on the St. Olaf homepage, which staff believe has created an “alienating misperception that all of our graduates go corporate.”

The Main Street Project, in many opinions, requires openness to student exploration of life after college by whatever means they desire. For example, what students do immediately after graduation is not what they will do for the rest of their lives, thus the college “needs to be more sensitive and aware of the formative nature of the four years *after* college.” Instead of a short-term focus on what students do immediately after college, there should be a more holistic attitude toward cultivating students’ passions and skills that will serve them well, not only for the formative years that closely follow college, but also hopefully for their entire lives.

President Anderson’s Perceptions of Higher Education

The President’s beliefs on higher education mirror those of most faculty and staff members. In his opinion, higher education equips students with the thinking and analytical skills that enables them to be “better thinkers, better workers, and more informed.” In this way, students will be more prepared to enter the workforce and be productive members of society. He also sees higher education as a place for students to practice the skills that they will need when they are living independently.

In terms of what he hopes students will gain from their St. Olaf education, he lays out three specific goals. First, he wishes for students to leave St. Olaf as financially independent.

Second, he wants students to be professionally accomplished in their jobs or careers. Lastly, he hopes that students will be personally fulfilled in their lives after college, or at least on the path toward fulfillment. St. Olaf, as a college of the mind and heart, can help students realize these three aspects by “encouraging and supporting students in getting commitments.”

President Anderson’s Understanding of the College’s Mission Statement

Overall, the President seems to be in agreement with the three core aspects of the mission statement, namely that it is engaged in the liberal arts, incorporates a global perspective, and is rooted in the Christian gospel. He also believes, however, that there are ways for the school to improve the mission statement. For example, his opinion is that the mission statement is too narrow, and needs to be broadened. The language of being “rooted in the Christian gospel” is in need of reworking, as it comes across as “defensive and apologetic.” Moreover, he would like the school to move away from its practice of writing a commentary on the mission statement, as we were told it has done every 25 years – the most recent being published circa 2000 (St. Olaf College, 1999). According to the President, a long-form commentary on the mission statement ends up giving a narrower sense than the original mission statement intends and “inflicts particular views of the world.”

President Anderson on the Main Street Project’s Mission

Many referenced the Main Street Project as the President’s “baby.” As such, the President has particular views on the Project and what he hopes it achieves. In his opinion, Main Street “creates space within the notion of a liberal arts education to include activities to help students leave college on the path toward employment.” In other words, it should be up to the

college to help students figure out what they are good at and what they like to do, and enable students to get a job. If, despite your best efforts, you as a student cannot get a job, then the President believes “your college has failed you.” President Anderson stated that until recently, programming in the Center for Experiential Learning was not reaching a wide range of students, which is indicative of the changes to the College that the Main Street Project hopes to achieve: increased access to services designed to help students find and land a job after graduation. Furthermore, the President sees the CEL as too narrowly focused on non-profit opportunities, and needs to be broadened to accommodate “a full range of activities” to be consistent with Main Street’s goal to provide a full range of employment opportunities after graduation.

The focus on jobs, according to the President, is the result of the cost of the liberal arts education. In his mind, “cost is at the forefront of parents’ and students’ minds.” Thus, Main Street seeks to ease that particular anxiety. Moreover, in response to criticisms and anxieties that have been expressed concerning the Project, the President believes that people generally think the Main Street Project is a good idea and a good thing to do, and the persons in opposition are a small number with “silly” views. However, he does acknowledge that the Project has not been effectively communicating its goals. Like many other staff members, he attributes this to a lack of a director for the Center for Vocation and Career, who will provide clearer goals for the Project. In the meantime, the President made a point to reiterate what his fundamental drive is in pushing the Main Street Project: “More information, not less. Broader options, not fewer. Anything limiting, narrowing, restricting, is bad.”

Visions of an Ideal Main Street Project

A number of staff members outlined what the ideal Main Street Project approach would look like. To begin with, several mentioned that they believe it is important to measure personal as well as professional growth. As one staff person stated bluntly, “this doesn’t happen if you are just concerned *if* they have a job after they graduate and if it’s a *well-paying* job.” Rather, the College needs to validate each graduate and what they might think is best for his/herself. This can be achieved by finding ways to help current students identify their own personal goals and values and help them find ways to live those out. Moreover, the College needs to embrace students’ individual interests and goals, and “give people credit for knowing what is right for themselves at that time.”

Summary and Important Findings

Throughout our research on St. Olaf’s educational philosophy, its mission statement and the Main Street Project, we encountered a range of widely varied perspectives. Nonetheless, certain topics garnered considerable agreement. In general, students, faculty and staff all seem to value the liberal arts highly. They see the interconnected importance of the three-pronged mission statement, and believe that the College is generally successful in its fulfillment. Likewise, most interviewees consider current programs like those offered in the CEL to be very useful (albeit often largely underutilized) tools. The Main Street Project, however, remains a point of both contention and confusion, even among those who are directly involved in its development and implementation.

Overall, students, faculty and staff agree that higher education should be considered a time for concentrated and uninhibited personal development and self-exploration. The focus of this development, however, depends on the individual. The beauty of higher education, many

believe, is that each student will gain something different. Although almost every interviewee mentioned the importance of higher education for future employment, most believe that “finding a job” should not be the main focus of a rich and rewarding college experience. In other words, it is beneficial to remain focused on the future, but only in addition to valuing the present for the developing character, personal goals, and a sense of self-worth. This is in contrast to the Gallup poll mentioned in the Literature Review (Ross, 2012), in which a third of those surveyed selected “to get a good job” is the greatest outcome of higher education. One reason for this difference could be that many students at St. Olaf have selected this college for its liberal arts values in particular, not just for career preparation.

The majority of students, faculty, and staff agree that the interdisciplinary perspective of a liberal arts education is greatly effective in helping students become well-rounded, critically minded and civically engaged members of society. By allowing students to explore topics of interest outside of their major(s), St. Olaf enables a breadth of exploration that is not possible at most other colleges. A common concern, voiced primarily by students, is that there are very few courses available that present obvious and practicable bridges between disciplines (for example, Campus Ecology). Despite St. Olaf’s multidisciplinary course requirements, many students are unsure how they might apply the skills and knowledge from their own majors to different contexts – in particular, to the “real world.” One student interviewee pondered, “Should there even be separate major categories at a liberal arts college, or should all students create their own combination?”

The mission’s three core pillars (the liberal arts, the Christian gospel, and a global perspective) are generally very familiar and important to faculty and staff, but certain elements tend to hold less obvious meaning for students. For all interviewees, the liberal arts seemed to be

“a given.” St. Olaf’s “rooting in the Christian gospel” occasionally drew some ambivalence, however, which was often based on the interviewees’ religious affiliation. Even so, many individuals, even those who identified themselves as non-Christians, valued the College’s very liberalized Lutheran identity for its ability to bring religion into critical conversation. What tended to be the most contentious for interviewees were the ideas of “global citizenship” and “unselfish service to others.” Most were in general agreement regarding the definitions of global citizenship and service, but not all were certain that these ideas were fostered effectively or with the right definition in mind. Specifically, there was a concern that St. Olaf views service very narrowly, as either volunteerism or non-profit work, and that service should encompass a broader definition.

Regarding the Main Street Project, several faculty and students expressed concern that St. Olaf might be straying from its mission as a liberal arts institution. A summary of our data, however, reveals that interviewees who were less familiar with the initiative tended to voice greater skepticism and concern – and in general, familiarity was very low. The Main Street Project’s lack of a rigorous and consistent communication plan, in addition to the perceived inability of students and faculty to influence the changes occurring around them, has stirred considerable confusion and anger. For most, it has been visible only through seemingly fragmented and intermittent changes appearing on campus: news stories on the St. Olaf homepage, the design of Tomson Hall, and the changing of the CEL to the CVC. There is a widespread perception, given the apparent narrowing of focus on for-profit career orientation, that the initiative’s intent is to transform St. Olaf into a vocational school, thus essentially inhibiting free exploration of academic interests. There is also a sense that the initiative is

intended to serve the financial interests of the College while neglecting the needs of current students.

President David Anderson insists that the Main Street Project's focus on career is not intended to be a narrowing of the college experience in order to push students into specific jobs, but rather an effort to instill in students a sense of intentionality about their educational experience. Several faculty members share this view, although certainly not all. Even so, significant communication gaps surrounding the Main Street Project have created a general air of worry and suspicion among certain faculty and a great deal of the student body. Much trepidation is the result of what several students and faculty perceive to be an imbalanced corporate focus manifested most visibly in the job-related news stories featured on the St. Olaf website in the 2011-2012 academic year (St. Olaf College, 2012b). President Anderson argues that the intent is to celebrate the full range of opportunities available to Oles, partly in an effort to counteract what he considers to be a gross imbalance of attention that is currently focused almost exclusively on volunteerism and the nonprofit sector. The high level of stigma toward corporate positions among many students and faculty has contributed significant tension to the college's desire to increase attention to the for-profit sector, and several are worried that the college is beginning to stray away from its mission as a liberal arts institution. Yet, President Anderson counters this frustration with the point that in order to counteract the corruption we see in the world, we must embed such perceived problem areas with fresh morals and integrity. In other words, we want Oles to be everywhere, in every type of job and in all sectors of the economy, not just in the nonprofit sector. "Do you want them done well by good people," he asks, "or done by shifty [people] who will ruin the economy?" A faculty member summed it up like this: "We need Oles on Wall Street as well. There's a lot of corruption there. Quite frankly, they could really use our help."

Overall, we perceived among our interviewees a pervasiveness of severely polarized opinions surrounding the purpose of a liberal arts education and the Main Street Project. It appears as though there is an imaginary war taking place between the “service people” and the “job people.” The result is that of ever-increasing defensiveness on either side. Not only does this polarization cause a great deal of negative political tension on campus, but it also leaves little room for more moderate and integrative thinking.

Recommendations for Improvement of the Main Street Project

Regarding the aforementioned polarization of opinions, we recommend a concerted effort toward greater ideological integration. Career should not be considered antithetical to service. The possible danger in assuming their natural parity, however, is the potential for causing vocational complacency. It is important for students to consider *how* their intended career might translate into a life of “unselfish service to others.” This inquiry should not be viewed in light of martyrdom, but rather as an opportunity to probe deeper into the complexities of society and our human existence. Thus, volunteerism should not be considered merely a sign of altruism or an obligatory résumé builder. It should be valued for its ability to enlighten us to the systems in which we live and to provide us with the tools and insights needed to live with heightened empathy and intentionality.

How does all of this translate into actionable goals for St. Olaf College? As the Main Street Project begins its next phase of implementation with the installation of the new director of the CVC, heightened attention must be given to timely and carefully targeted communication. Much confusion has already resulted from a somewhat piecemeal and disconnected approach to public relations. Most interviewees admitted that they understood very little, if anything, about

the Main Street Project, but criticized what they believed to be an utter lack of transparency. The Main Street Project Objectives state that “the Main Street Initiative will be communicated in a clear, compelling way to current students, prospective students, parents, faculty, academic staff, alumni, donors, and other friends of the College” (St. Olaf College, 2010b). In light of our findings, it is apparent that the Project needs to give a more concerted effort to communicate its goals and objectives more clearly.

By connecting conversations throughout our interview process we revealed that in addition to the perceived lack of information, many communication efforts regularly reach unintended audiences. For example, certain staff were surprised to learn that nearly the entire current student body visits the St. Olaf homepage on a daily basis. To them, the homepage had always been the domain of parents and prospective students. It is no wonder that many students viewed the recurring senior success to be boastful and unnecessary at a time when they felt insecure about their own post-graduation plans.

There does exist a certain concern that students and faculty would not be receptive to increased information on the Main Street Project. While one faculty member voiced his regret that the Main Street “brand” seems to be fading, others are unsure that any increased communication efforts will be able to effectively “break through the clutter.” Yet, our research has suggested otherwise. As creatures of thought, we are constantly seeking to make sense of our environment. Thus, the limited nature of information on the Main Street Project has incited many students and faculty to form their own conclusions – most of which, not surprisingly, are quite biased.

What would effective faculty- and student-oriented communication mean? In summary, it would strengthen and clarify the rhetoric of integration discussed at the beginning of this section.

Students and faculty should be pushed constantly to reflect on the actionable opportunities provided by the full St. Olaf experience. In other words, the persistent question should be not only “What am I learning,” but “What can I *do* with all of this learning?” This type of question is, in fact, intended to be the guiding focus of the Main Street Project, but it has been obscured by the cloud of miscommunication and political tension that has resulted from a fragmented and disconnected method of implementation.

Suggestions for Further Research

A more comprehensive study would have included prospective students and their parents, alumni, and possibly a variety of potential employers of recent college graduates. Our study focused singularly on the discourse present within the day-to-day work of the institution itself (which should, at least according to several of our interviewees, be the most important point of concern). It would be beneficial for further research, however, to understand the College’s promotional challenges from an external perspective by inquiring into the perceptions and expectations of prospective students and their parents.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

For students:

1. What year are you?
2. What's your major?
3. What do you view the purpose of higher education to be?
4. What do you hope to get out of your St. Olaf education?
5. Do you believe a liberal arts education is important to receive?
6. What are you parents' opinions of St. Olaf College?
7. Have you gone to the CEL?
8. Have you ever heard of the Main Street Project, and if so, what role does it play on campus?
9. Do you know anything about the St. Olaf Mission Statement? If so, what do you hold to be important from it? If not, what do you think St. Olaf's mission, as an educational institution, should be?
10. How have your expectations of life after graduation shifted over your 1-2-3-4 year(s) at St. Olaf? What or who has influenced these shifts? (Classes? CEL activities? Influential professors? Advisor meetings? Friends? Internships? More?)
11. Do you believe St. Olaf offers equal opportunities for all career choices?
12. What do you believe is the most sought-after path after graduation? (Other questions to follow up with if they hesitate: What does St. Olaf want you to do? What do students want to do?)

For faculty and staff:

1. What's the role of higher education in our society?
2. What do you hope students get out of their St. Olaf education?
3. What do you believe to be the importance and practical value of a liberal arts education?
4. What do you know about the Mission Statement? What do you hold to be important from it? What do you think should be added or subtracted from it (if anything)?
5. Part of the Mission Statement reads, "[St. Olaf College] encourages [students] to be seekers of truth, leading lives of unselfish service to others; and it challenges them to be responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world." How do you interpret this?
6. Do you believe St. Olaf offers opportunities for global citizenship and service learning?
7. What's the relationship between getting a liberal arts education and getting a job after graduation?
8. What do you perceive to be the College's expectations of students after graduation?
9. What do you believe to be the role of the Main Street Project on campus?
10. As a faculty member seeing the college's changes, what do you see to be the anxieties, perceptions, and tensions behind the MSP? What are the origins of it?
11. For faculty that went to St. Olaf: how have expectations of students changed since your years on the Hill? What about students' own expectations? What has caused this shift?