

**Oles' Perception of Political Discourse on St. Olaf Campus**

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**Ethnographic Research Methods**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **Abstract**

We conducted an ethnographic research project on the current political awareness of St. Olaf College students. We investigated the active participation of students within the political circle through involvement in politically affiliated organizations, campaigns, and attendance at political events. In addition, we attempted to disclose the hybrid political identity that surrounds the college campus. As such, the focus of our project was to determine the current political orientation of St. Olaf College in regards to students' desire to be aware and involved in the political world. Some conservative scholars have argued that the lack of political diversity on American college campuses leads to indoctrination of students with liberal ideals, a phenomenon they greatly criticize. Based on this phenomenon, we set out to examine the perception of political orientation of St. Olaf and how this has the potential to influence students' political involvement on campus.

#### **Key Points**

- Majority of students perceive a liberal bias at St. Olaf.
- Conservative students feel constrained in expressing their views in the classroom setting.
- Students feel St. Olaf organizations offer opportunities for students to become politically active if they take the initiative to do so.
- Liberal organizations tend to have a more visible presence on campus.
- Students perceive faculty as playing an integral role in the direction of class discussion, however they do not directly influence students' political views.
- Students feel pressure to be "politically correct" when sharing their views in class, especially when they are not knowledgeable on the issue being discussed.
- There is a range of opinions in comfortability discussing political views with peers.

## **Abstract**

We conducted an ethnographic research project on the current political awareness of St. Olaf College students. We investigated the active participation of students within the political circle through involvement in politically affiliated organizations, campaigns, and attendance at political events. In addition, we attempted to disclose the hybrid political identity that surrounds the college campus. As such, the focus of our project was to determine the current political orientation of St. Olaf College in regards to students' desire to be aware and involved in the political world. Some conservative scholars have argued that the lack of political diversity on American college campuses leads to indoctrination of students with liberal ideals, a phenomenon they greatly criticize. Based on this phenomenon, we set out to examine the perception of political orientation of St. Olaf and how this has the potential to influence students' political involvement on campus.

## **Setting/Community**

St. Olaf College is a private liberal arts college located in Northfield, Minnesota. The population is composed of 3,179 students, including a wide variety of students from Minnesota and many other states and countries. The college was founded in 1874 by Norwegian immigrants and is currently associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Like many liberal arts colleges, the curriculum includes a wide variety of disciplines also providing an option to create-your-own major. St. Olaf has an international reputation for its music program and is one of the leading colleges in environmental science and sustainability. St. Olaf strives to be environmentally friendly and social-justice oriented which has led to it being a prominent and important player in the Northfield community.

The town of Northfield has a population of around 20,000 people, which includes students from both St. Olaf and Carleton college during the academic year. Minneapolis and St. Paul (the Twin Cities) are 40 miles north of the town and is the closest, large metropolitan center. St. Olaf's location in Northfield is very important to our study due to

the unique culture of Minnesota and the Twin Cities; these specific cultures are often viewed as more accepting and politically open minded than many other states in the Midwest or the United States, with the Twin Cities seen as more politically aware than other parts of Minnesota.

As a private liberal arts college, the curriculum at St. Olaf strives to integrate learning from different disciplines in order to create well-rounded, globally knowledgeable students. St. Olaf students are among some of the most socially active students in the country, as the college recently earned the top Peace Corps ranking, with 24 alumni currently serving abroad (St. Olaf College Online). This statistic supports the college's mission to "encourage [students] to be seekers of truth, leading lives of unselfish service to others; and challenge them to be responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world" (St. Olaf College Mission Statement). The liberal arts curriculum, spanning all academic disciplines, is a motivating factor in students achieving these intended learning outcomes. In addition to a comprehensive curriculum, the mission statement also calls for St. Olaf, "to be an inclusive community, respecting those of differing backgrounds and beliefs. Through its curriculum, campus life, and off-campus programs, it stimulates students' critical thinking and heightens their moral sensitivity" (St. Olaf College Mission Statement). With students holding a variety of interests across academic disciplines, this sets the stage for the existence of a hybrid political identity of St. Olaf students which will be examined through this research.

## **Methodology**

The objective of our study was to investigate the current political discourse that exists at St. Olaf College. We decided that the most effective way to explore this aspect of the college was through conducting one-on-one interviews with selected students and attending political events on campus. We strongly believed that this course of action would open the window for dialogue, reflection and critical analysis of the political climate that currently surrounds the St. Olaf campus.

The set of questions we designed for this study reflect how students perceive political awareness, involvement, and engagement across the campus. We contacted heads of political organizations through email to request their participation in our study. We also interviewed students that were willing to participate in our study; this included friends and peers within our peripheral surroundings. We recruited for additional interviews through the “St. Olaf Extra” email alias. We conducted forty interviews with students who spanned twenty majors and concentrations. Most of the interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis but some included a note taker who was not an active participant in the conversation. The interviews were conducted in this way rather than in focus groups to avoid potential conflict among participants, as politics can often become a volatile discussion. Every interview was recorded on the interviewer's personal computer in order for the group to re-listen, add notes and draw on themes across the interviews. From this, we shared broad themes and information with other group members as well as specific quotes in order to analyze our findings.

Among the forty respondents, eighteen identified as liberal, nine as conservative, five as independent, two as democratic, five as republican and one that did not identify with any particular political affiliation. The respondent pool offered a wide

range of political identities, which we found to be particularly beneficial in assessing and analyzing the political dynamic currently encompassing St. Olaf campus.

However, we did face a number of challenges as we conducted our research. Since politics can often become a topic of conflict, and several interviews took place with peripheral peers, it is possible that those interviews failed to get enough information out of the participants. Rapport is often an integral part of the interviewing process that could allow for a more truthful account to be revealed. Additionally, our collection methods were slightly biased because of the tendency to shift toward students based on personal contacts. As a result, this limited the diverse array of students that we hoped recruit for this study. Although we were able to interview forty students across twenty academic disciplines, our findings obviously cannot be generalizable to each individual on campus. Since our respondent pool was only forty out of a student population of 3,179, it will be difficult to generalize our findings to every individual's personal perception. However, we do believe that we captured an general picture of how political ideology manifests itself among students across campus at St. Olaf College.

## **Problem**

The problem we investigated focused on the current political identity at St. Olaf College, as perceived by students. In American colleges in general there tends to be a lack of political diversity. St. Olaf College is no exception. The general consensus is that St. Olaf College has an established liberal majority. A conservative columnist boldly states,

“There is one kind of diversity that is actually central to both a liberal education and a flourishing free society. That's intellectual diversity: the diversity of ideas,

of philosophical perspectives, of ways of looking at and understanding the world. Unfortunately, the last place to look for this kind of diversity is at American colleges and universities. Today, you can generally find a wider spectrum of opinion in any bowling alley or fast-food restaurant than in the faculty lounges of a typical American university.” [Kersten, 2003: 79]

This quote from Kersten, echoes scholarly literature that finds American college campuses to be liberal. This lack of diversity that Kersten identifies correlates to a liberal bias on college campuses. As a result, the liberal political ideology manifests itself among St. Olaf students and campus organizations in ways that can ultimately suppress conservative ideals. These repercussions are implemented on students that deviate from the liberal majority on campus. This generates a closed dialogue of political issues both in the classroom and among the wider student population, resulting in an unbalanced representation of political ideologies in the college. In a step towards establishing a loose definition of the current political identity, we also looked towards the political activism and awareness of students. This was important because students’ activism generates the political discourse on campus either perpetuating the liberal bias or challenging it.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to analyze the perception of political discourse on campus, we used Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse as theoretical framework for our project. In terms of Foucault’s concept of discourse and power, St. Olaf can be defined as an institution that holds authority over the students, controlling the dominant discourse on campus. Foucault asserts that there is a “web of prohibition” that defines the boundaries of acceptable discourse, that is, what can and cannot be said and that “where the danger spots are most numerous are those dealing with politics and sexuality” (1972:

216). Foucault believes every person understands the rules of exclusion and knows that in social situations there are rules that govern appropriate topics of conversation. Those who dominate the discourse in an educational system tend to control and limit the expression of other more marginalized viewpoints. The task of our research was to identify these rules and discover how they are enforced at St. Olaf. The *idea* that the campus is liberal has effects on how people behave in and perceive the political climate, regardless of whether their views are liberal or not.

Although higher education has the potential to expose students to a diversity of discourses, “we all know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (Foucault, 1972: 227). By belittling dissenting opinions, a monopoly on the discussion is sustained by those in control of the discourse; they set the parameters for conversation according to their own objectives. However, due to the hybrid political identity at St. Olaf, those dominating the discourse may not be limited to professors. Students play an integral role in creating the political climate and discourse of the campus. At St. Olaf there is a commonly held perception of a majority liberal campus. If this is the case, the liberal thinkers hold the power Foucault discusses and conservatives may feel marginalized. For our study, Foucault’s theory of discourse helps us to understand how the perceived political climate of St. Olaf affects students’ comfort level in expressing their own beliefs, especially if these beliefs contradict the dominant discourse.

## **Literature Review**

### *Influence of Higher Education Systems on Political Knowledge and Engagement*

A dynamic relationship exists between political engagement and knowledge among students of higher education, which intimately connects to the problem of our study. The students' perception of political discourse found at St. Olaf College is directly tied to the ways in which the student population is engaged in and aware of the current political sphere. Hillygus notes in his essay about higher education and political engagement, that citizens who are more educated are more likely to want to be involved with politics. From this, Hillygus reasons that people with higher education more actively engage with and work in their political sphere (Hillygus, 2003). Conversely, Galston argues that college students feel obligated to be politically engaged, but "their grasp of what it means to be a citizen is rudimentary and dominated by a focus of rights, thus creating a privately oriented, passive understanding" (Galston, 2005). This declares that college students, while obtaining a higher education and gaining the ability to think critically and understand the current affairs of the state, still remain uninformed and passive. As such, college students, regardless of their belief that they are strong-minded citizens, may not result in wholly politically knowledgeable citizens. Therefore, these essays can help analyze the reasons as to why St. Olaf College students may or may not be politically engaged or aware, ultimately resulting in differing perspectives of the students' image of the current political discourse.

### *Influence of Upbringing and Childhood Experiences*

Adolescence is a stage of life where young people are heavily influenced by ideas and opinions that are presented to them by their peers, teachers, and especially their parents. Parents are very influential figures in shaping the minds of their children through their interactions with their children. As such, the family is an institution that is “the primary socialization context for young people” with regard to political attitudes and behaviors (Quintelier Hooghe, & Badescu 2007). The family is one of the many ways that children receive important information regarding values, behaviors, norms and social issues. Parents also transmit political knowledge as well as political behavior and attitudes to their children. One aspect of political socialization is the expectation that the influence of parents socialization and transmission of political knowledge has the greatest impact at an early age and that it will decline as the child becomes older (2007).

The context of the family is where the first experiences of a political discussion or political activity often take place for a young child. Political discussions occur frequently in some families, while in other families, the topic of politics is avoided altogether (John, Halpern, & Morris 2002). Within the construct of the family as an institution, the parents hold authority over their children based on principle that parents provide for the basic needs of the child. Parents also have responsibility of teaching guidelines for socialization to their children. Therefore, the parents’ authority over the child controls the political conversation and stimulates the child’s willingness to acquire information (2002). The power-relationship between parent and child strongly influences the child’s want to either accept or reject their parents’ political beliefs. One reason for this is the relationship between parents and children where it is typical for the child to accept and believe the thoughts and opinion of their parents. This is known as the

socialization hypothesis, which stresses continuity between the parent and the child (Lewis & Kraut 1972). This asserts that more “radical” students may have parents that have more liberal ideals while “conservative activists” may have parents that are more committed to traditional American values (Flacks 1967).

Evidence of the continuum between parents and children relates to aspects of socialization in terms of political beliefs and ideology. This continuity is supported by “the observed similarity between parents and students suggesting that transmission of party preferences from one generation to the next is carried out rather successfully in the American context” (Jennings and Niemi 1968). If parents have democratic beliefs and raise their children based on these beliefs, then young children are ultimately more likely to become more “democratic-minded” (Quintelier 2007). Lewis and Kraut conducted a study analyzing student political orientation and the correlation between activism and ideology within a sample of 164 Yale freshmen. One of the main findings of this study was that there exists a significant relationship between student and parent political beliefs (Lewis 1972). From this we can reason that political behavior, actions, and attitudes of parents heavily influence their children’s development in these same topics. In the same respect, the child identifies the parent as a role model in terms of the family social structure. Parents are seen by their children as a political role model and internalize the habits and behaviors of their parents (Quintelier 2007) Thus, children who have parents who vote and are politically engaged tend to actively participate in civic and political life as they grow older (Plutzer 2002).

Not all parents and family units are equally effective in influencing the political beliefs and ideologies of their children as is evident by the growing focus of society on

individuality. With a focus on developing individual thinking, some parents have a definitive goal of not influencing the political attitudes and behaviors of their children (Torney-Putra 2004). As children grow into adolescence they begin to shape their own identities and beliefs by seeking out “values and ideologies that transcend the immediate concerns of family and self” (Erikson 1968). Some authors argue that the influence of parents on young people’s political beliefs depends on the “political interest of young people” (Quintelier 2007). Therefore, the influence of political behaviors and attitudes is greater if the child has high levels of interest in politics as opposed to a lower interest or indifference.

### *Influence of College*

Leaving adolescence where political opinions are primarily shaped by parents, students in the college atmosphere are instead highly influenced by their peers and college faculty. Faculty ideology has become a subject of considerable debate in recent years as the result of the publication of a number of studies that suggest that college faculties are ideologically and politically out-of-touch with the general public opinion.

The book *One Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America’s Top Colleges Indoctrinate our Students and Undermine our Democracy*, argues that although many institutions have policies explicitly prohibiting the use of the classroom for political indoctrination, “this rule and rules like it at academic institutions across the country are increasingly ignored by university professors and almost never enforced by university administrations” (Horowitz and Laskin 2009). Although colleges and universities have implemented policies that require a certain level of neutrality when it comes to the

political views of faculty, they are not enforced in many cases. This echoes earlier discussion of the lack of ideological diversity at colleges and universities and allows for skepticism regarding the content of the curriculum at these institutions.

Another study finds that institutions are a “virtual one party state, ideological monopolies, badly unbalanced ecosystems. They are utterly flightless birds with only one wing to flap. They do not, when it comes to political and cultural ideas, look like America” (American Enterprise 2005). According to a survey conducted by Rasmussen Reports, party affiliations are equally distributed when categorized as Democrat (33.1%), Republican (35.1%) and Unaffiliated (33.8 %). This contradicts the notion that students become more liberal after college. While faculty orientation is overwhelmingly liberal at many institutions, student orientation when leaving college is not significantly different than the population at large (Hewitt 2008). Most literature agrees that college faculties are overwhelmingly liberal however a majority disagree that this influences the political orientation of students.

## **Findings & Analysis**

### *Defining “Conservative” and “Liberal”*

The terms “liberal” and “conservative” are extremely ambiguous. Webster’s online dictionary defines the concept of “liberalism” as “a philosophy based on a belief in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual” while the concept of being politically “conservative” is defined as “a political philosophy based on tradition and social stability, stressing established institutions and preferring gradual development to abrupt change” (Webster’s Online Dictionary). These definitions

are supported by many students at St. Olaf, but a discrepancy exists between how students identify other political identities and how they identify their own political identities.

In several interview responses, St. Olaf students formed a general consensus regarding stereotypes of liberals and conservatives. As one respondent pointed out, “There’s almost this idea that being a democrat is hipster, a trendy way to be. You’re an independent, young person who is socially active. There’s definitely this image.” Being “socially active” connotes holding a belief in progress and emphasizes the autonomy of the individual, as the aforementioned definition states. Students at St. Olaf feel that this political identity leads to a general acceptance on campus, meaning that not being “liberal” is socially sanctioned. On the other side, another student self-identified as a moderate republican defined his political identity as being “maybe a little bit held back and not too fiery.” From this, it was understood that they meant that conservative republicans were not held back and make their opinions known in a very active way. Both of these stereotypes, of liberalism being positive and of a certain amount of negativity regarding being conservative, align with the experience of politics at St. Olaf as described by the majority of students we interviewed. A majority of respondents associated liberal ideals with the St. Olaf campus, faculty, and students which offers an explanation for why the identity of liberal is more positive than that of “conservative.” Many students agreed that being an outspoken Republican at St. Olaf is rare, “Whenever I find somebody who is outspokenly Republican, there’s a little bit of shock that comes with it.”

When discussing personal political affiliation, we had a mix of Republican and Democrat respondents but a large part of the respondents defined themselves as politically “independent”. This discrepancy explores how the students describe themselves personally and how they define the campus. When each respondent was asked to describe themselves politically, some said “I’m socially liberal but fiscally conservative.” There were also students that supported a combination of political views, especially on social issues. For example, one respondent noted being a liberal but on certain issues, such as dealing with abortion, identified with more conservative views. One interviewee described herself as moderately liberal, but environmentally and educationally conscious which are values that often align with democratic ideologies. The interviewee considers herself an Independent; she can agree with aspects with both parties and she doesn’t want to identify with a particular political ideology too strongly. She doesn’t want to feel tied to one party or another. This “hybrid” identity contradicts the idea of a singular political ideology of the campus as identified by the students. This suggests that St. Olaf may be more of an independent campus than the liberal majority perceived by students.

### *Influences on Political Identity*

Throughout our interviews, students mainly focused on their parents’ influence on their political ideas. No students mentioned other relatives as having an influence on their political views. The majority of our interviewees mentioned that their parents’ influence on their political beliefs was strong but it didn’t dictate their own beliefs. Some students openly stated in their interviews that they hold the same political views as their parents.

However, a few students mentioned having one Republican and one Democratic parent, while they identified as Independent. In most interviews, students stated that one parent had a stronger influence on their political beliefs while they were growing up. One student talked about how her mother has been more of an influence on her political views than her father. She went on to explain how her mother does not lean towards a particular political party, but emphasized the importance of listening to both sides and then deciding your stance on a certain issue. The student stated that her mother also emphasized that “one party's view is not the end all be all, but you can agree with both parties and it is normal to do that.” Other students also acknowledged that their parents encouraged them to listen to both sides, and therefore remaining informed on differing perspectives. We interpret this to mean that a student can hold conservative views on one issue while simultaneously identifying as liberal on another issue. This idea supports the concept of a hybrid identity, in which students hold a combination of political views. Thus, students’ political identities are generally influenced by their parents’ political beliefs but as students age, their views can either align or differ.

Another influence on student’s political identity that we were interested in investigating further was the impact of students’ individual school experiences. The majority of our interviewees described experiences from high school or St. Olaf that impacted their political beliefs. One respondent described her experiences from school that influenced her political identity: “Lots of conversations.... and a lot of the things I tended to be interested in, that my school got me interested [in] were issues that tended to be supported by more liberal parties, like environmental classes.” Another student mentioned their study abroad experience during high school as being the pivotal point in

determining the political views he has today. He explained that before his experience abroad he identified with more liberal political views, but after returning home his views changed. Through examining his upbringing he decided he held more moderate Republican ideas. This supports the notion that external factors play an integral role in how students identify politically.

St. Olaf prides itself on enhancing students' global perspective through study abroad experiences and its comprehensive curriculum. These experiences often translate into changes in students' political beliefs. For example, a student who spent a semester in India noted that her experiences abroad deepened her liberal political ideology. Consequently, she became more active in the political circle upon her return to St. Olaf; she became a board member of St. Olaf Students for Barack Obama and joined the Environmental Coalition. This illustrates that St. Olaf abroad experiences have the potential to motivate students toward political activism by enhancing their global perspectives.

### *Politics in the Classroom*

The classroom is a place where a vast majority of political ideas and identities come together in a single space. Most respondents consistently agree that professors are an integral part of the classroom environment in regards to discussing political ideologies. These participants declared that their professors fostered a respectful and productive atmosphere in which all political ideas could be talked about openly. However, the majority of the students that made such claims are liberally inclined, and believe that their professors are as well. This belief generated the notion that all courses

promote an environment to discuss topics freely and without prejudice. Conversely, the students that possess moderate to conservative views professed to much more constrained and limited access to share their political ideas within the classroom.

One student recalls a classroom experience in which he felt particularly constrained in expressing his political views in his Environmental Studies course. A “moderate conservative”, he remembered that most of the dialogue which took place within the classroom remained on the liberal side of the spectrum. He noted not feeling entirely comfortable expressing his views, especially since it would challenge the common political ideology held within the classroom: “There were some points where I disagreed on—and I couldn’t have been the only one—but no one said anything to object to the common opinion. There’s no way that all views are being represented.” This student felt that he was unable to express his views due to the dominant political opinion held by the class.

Furthermore, the inability to discuss particular issues in the classroom can also extend to the grades portion of the course. Conservative students have often noted that sometimes there is a need to agree with all of the professor’s points. There is “a big fear in disagreeing with your professor based on your grade”; some students expressed concern that disagreeing with their professors’ stance will influence their grade in the course. Conservative students especially expressed this concern in classes that dealt with more liberal and discursive issues. Although this occurred in several cases throughout our interviews we note that it cannot be generalized to all circumstances within the classroom. There is a difference between ideology and political views just as there is a difference between being “correct” and “incorrect”. As a result a student is not often

judged for their interpretation of their views but whether or not it is factually correct. For one student she simply resigned herself to the situation: “I ended up just writing about things that I didn’t necessarily agree with, but I got better grades on my papers, and I ended up getting an A in the class.” Consequently, there is a blurred line between the academic component of the course and the students’ perception of integration of the professors’ political views into the graded coursework.

Aside from the professor, how do the other students contribute to ability to share and express political ideology? When asked about the political identity of students at St. Olaf, a college republican immediately answered: “I think that most of students here at Olaf would say that they were liberal. Whether or not it’s actually their standpoint or just to fit in, I’m not sure, but that’s the majority.” This “liberal” majority reflects the type of discussions held in the classroom. One student notes that after identifying himself as a conservative in his political science class: “I felt like I was pigeon-holed throughout the rest of the year. People were wary to listen to me because they wrote me off as the ‘class conservative.’” Consequently, he became reluctant to speak in class and also “felt like [he] had been denied his right to an open classroom.” This notes that many of the students that identify as conservative find it difficult to express their political opinions in the classroom, especially when it differs from the major opinion.

The main critique of some interviewees was there was not much diversity “in terms of political opinions because most students tend to be moderately liberal.” One student said that “We are such a small school and a set demographic, with no graduate students and our students come from the same set of people who usually believe all the same things”. Although this same reasoning could be applied to validate a conservative

view, the respondent believed this to reflect on the college “liberal” experience. However, they did not believe that students were willing to take more controversial stances and no one was willing to play the devil’s advocate in order to facilitate a balanced discussion. When asked to expand on this viewpoint, some interviewees believed that the lack of balanced discussion occurred because those with differing opinions from the dominant discourse feared being criticized for their political views.

We also investigated the ideas of political correctness within our interviews and how this translated to discussing politics in the classroom. One respondent noted that there was a lack of clear terminology regarding the meaning of political correctness. Another student echoed this sentiment expressing that she found it difficult to “keep up” with what was considered to be politically correct and what was not. This made her reluctant to voice her opinions in class out of the fear that she would offend someone through her apparent lack of politically correct knowledge. Thus, some students felt that political correctness was a means of censoring opinions which would cause people to withhold their political opinions, halting open discussion in the classroom. This respondent felt that the term meant, “censoring. It is a very dirty phrase, isn’t it? Political correctness?” As a result, a variety of meanings are attached to the term “political correctness” and that it can often limit forms of open discussion. One respondent noted, “We are taught to be respectful of other cultures and beliefs, why shouldn’t that extend to political ideas?”

It is worth noting that none of the “liberal” students that were interviewed observed any sort of “unwelcome atmosphere” within the classroom. As a result, it is not surprising that the “constrained” experiences of conservative and moderate students go

unnoticed by a large part of students. A member of the campus organization “St. Olaf Students for Barack Obama” expressed her satisfaction in the dialogue that took place in the classroom. “I feel like we are able to discuss most things in the classroom. In my environmental history class, politics comes up a lot and I never feel like I can’t share how I feel about a certain issue.” When asked about whether conservative students may feel constricted in class, she did acknowledge that the “liberal-ness” of the classroom could result in unequal distribution of opinions, but noted not to have experienced it before. In this sense, the classroom may not be the most fertile ground for fostering a wide variety of political opinions.

### *Politics and Peers*

The ways that students perceive the political views of the campus is directly tied to the level of comfortability that is experienced among students. The discourse of politics and the how freely students’ are able to express their political views develops the political perceptions that surround the campus. The general consensus found throughout our interviews indicated that students believed that St. Olaf was a liberal campus. This finding displayed that students’ perceptions perpetuated the liberal identity that most students associate with St. Olaf. Consequently, this identity associated with the campus influences how students’ converse about politics with their peers.

Our interviews suggest that there was a wide range of opinions among our interviewees about how comfortable they felt discussing their political views with their peers. There were some people who felt very open to discussing political issues with their close peers. For example, one participant noted that political discussion came up often

among her group of close peers, but that the majority of the group also held similar political beliefs. This created a rather limited dialogue and was less prone to tension among peers. However, other respondents reported that they did not bring up politics with close peers, fearing that it would result in dissension within the group. They wanted to avoid “getting into a debate” due to the opposing political views held by their peers.

St. Olaf is generally thought of as a very accepting and open environment for growing and expanding the mind. But how this tends to manifest itself among the interactions between peers outside of the classroom indicates that there seems to be some kind of discrepancy. The comfortability level that students associated with their peers is inconsistent; according to those with a peer group that has a mixture of political opinions, there tends to be a lack of political dialogue among them. Conversely, those with peer groups that have similar ideologies, politics is not a source of hot debate, but rather everyday conversation. As such, the expression of political views among peers is inconclusive.

### *Role of Campus*

Throughout our interviews, students believed that the college campus aided them in becoming more politically engaged through political organizations and events sponsored by the academic departments on campus. This presence consists of clubs such as The College Democrats, The College Republicans, Democracy Matters (concerned about political accountability and the corrupting influence of private money in American government), St. Olaf Students for Barack Obama (StObama), St. Olaf Conservatives, and St. Olaf Model United Nations. Students can also become politically involved

through groups pertaining to topics of awareness of social issues, such as Amnesty International, St. Olaf Environmental Coalition, Oles for Justice in Palestine, Oles for Israel, and Oles to Action (seeks to inform the St. Olaf student body of current social justice issues in global and local communities.) These groups, along with The Political Awareness Committee and various events led by different academic departments, have a very active role on campus in influencing students' political views.

Many respondents believed there were plenty of opportunities for students to become politically involved and aware. The political organizations were one of the great resources for students, but respondents also noted that it was up to the students to take the initiative. In other words, St. Olaf organizations offered the opportunities, but students were responsible for managing and seeking out their own engagement. For example, one participant noted that "they actually have to want to do something. Political awareness is entirely dependent on the student." A majority of students do take a stance on a wide variety of political issues, yet there tends to a lack of activism supporting those issues. Many participants were knowledgeable of political issues but were not actively engaged in the political sphere on campus.

When asked about the visibility of student organizations dealing with political and social issues on campus, many respondents discussed the co-curricular fairs held throughout the year. Students believed this to be a fundamental contributor in representing the wide variety of campus organizations that focused on political and social issues. This event would occur at least three times during the academic year, offering students the opportunity to get involved, if they desired. However, many respondents noted that organizations that were the most visible tended to be liberal, contributing to the

dominant liberal perception of the campus, and excluding underrepresented conservative views. Additionally, many students believed the political debates organized by the Political Awareness Committee tended to have the best visualization across campus. These debates covered a number of controversial issues, including abortion, death penalty, and GLBTQQI rights, and the audience of these debates were described to be “respectful and considerate”. Despite the liberal ideology, these debates fostered an enriching environment in which students could discuss their points but remain civil.

#### *Political Event Observation*

An event of interest that occurred during the course of our study was the Political Awareness Committee spring event, a debate between Howard Dean (Democrat) and Michael Steele (Republican). Our group attended the event and observed the atmosphere surrounding the political debate between members of the Democratic and Republican parties. The audience was composed mainly of students and despite the perceptions of a liberal majority, both parties were respected equally, although the words of Democratic party often garnered more applause. This was due to the Democratic representative bringing up many controversial issues, such as women’s reproductive rights and gay and lesbian equality, which elicited a very passionate and positive response. After witnessing this clear bias towards Democratic views, this further supports the students’ perception of the campus holding liberal ideals. Additionally, since this event was well-attended by students, we can generalize that the perception of liberal ideology at St. Olaf is not just a perception, but a reality.

The ending of the debate wrapped up with Dean classifying “us” as a multicultural generation that is willing to change and work with each other opposed to the atmosphere in Washington. Steele closed out the debate by saying what valuable asset students are to the country and it does matter who you vote for in the next election. These claims made by Dean and Steele accurately support the ideas held by a majority of the respondents in our study: The action of being politically engaged is the students’ initiative.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

A significant finding stems from the idea that St. Olaf students perceive a liberal bias on campus. In other words, there is a general tendency among students to lean towards the liberal side of issues since being liberal is more socially acceptable on campus. This finding is supported by both the scholarly literature and our theoretical framework which expresses that those that are part of the dominant discourse are more willing to express their views than those that oppose the majority opinion. In the case of St. Olaf College, liberals often dominate the discourse which results in conservatives feeling constrained in expressing their political views in an academic environment.

Subsequently, there is a significant finding in regards to politics in the classroom. Students perceive faculty as playing an integral role in the direction of class discussion, however they do not directly influence students’ political views. The professor is the one that often dominates the discourse, and as an authority figure within the classroom, students feel a pressure to conform. This correlates with the Foucault-ian philosophy that there is an accepted discourse which affects how people express their views.

Consequently, students who perceive the campus and their professors as liberal, are less likely to challenge that common discourse.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from our findings is that the political identity of St. Olaf students is predicated on the overwhelming desire to be socially active, a value often associated with those holding liberal ideals. Student organizations that are more visible on campus tend to align with liberal political views. This supports Kersten's argument that there is a lack of political diversity on college campuses. However, at St. Olaf College, we found that students' perception of campus was based on the visibility of liberal organizations as opposed to the lesser known conservative alternative. This illustrates that it is not as overwhelmingly biased as Kersten asserts but a liberal majority still exists on campus.

A considerably noteworthy point was that students felt pressured to be "politically correct" when sharing their views in class especially when they are not knowledgeable on the issue being discussed. This pressure can limit the degree to which students express their views in the classroom. There is a misconception that you must be politically correct when you share your opinion in class. This extends to conversations outside of the classroom where some students also feel pressure to be politically correct with their close peers, not wanting to offend those with opposing political views.

These conclusions illustrate a hybrid political identity at St. Olaf. We found that while students perceive St. Olaf to be a primarily liberal campus, conservative viewpoints are present on campus but are not as strongly represented as the liberal majority. Many respondents labelled "being liberal" as "trendy" which adds to the complexity of the St. Olaf political identity. This leads us to conclude that students perceive the campus as a

liberal majority however, the student body may not actually be as liberal as they believe themselves to be.

In the end, our findings are relevant for the St. Olaf administration, faculty and students. Our findings offer a general summary of students' perceptions of politics at St. Olaf which can be helpful in promoting the institution to prospective students and their families; we are a politically active campus, although the majority of publicized activities are liberally inclined. Consequently, faculty can find important suggestions regarding content of curriculum and perceptions of classroom discussions, as class discussion tends to be dominated by a liberal discourse. By bringing awareness to the liberal majority on campus, professors may be able to better incorporate opposing viewpoints into their course plans, fostering a more comprehensive political discussion on campus. Similarly for students, an awareness of the perception of politics on campus creates opportunities for discussions among organizations hoping to incorporate more conservative viewpoints on campus. By promoting diversity of political ideas on campus, the goal would be to create an equal footing for all political views concerning the political discourse that exists among St. Olaf students.

From our analysis, we have opened pathways for future exploration of the political discourse and climate at St. Olaf. For future research, we recommend further analysis of the differences between the political affiliation of the administration and the larger student population. In some interviews, students mentioned the perception that the St. Olaf administration held conservative views that contrast with students' perception of a liberal majority on campus. In order to investigate this view further, we suggest that future researchers interview St. Olaf College administration and professors about their

views on the general perception of the political views of administration and faculty on campus as well as their perception of the political ideology of the student body.

Another suggestion for future research, is to achieve a more representative sample of the student population at St. Olaf by expanding the sample size of students that are interviewed. Future researchers could increase the sample size by recruiting students for interviews through PO box interest forms and tabling in front of the cafeteria rather than just emails. Additionally, we would like to explore students' perceptions of stereotypes about liberals and conservatives by asking students what their views of liberals and conservatives are on a general level and compare their views to perceptions of liberals and conservatives on campus.

Reflecting on our research process we questioned: What constructs a college student's political identity? What influences their desire to be politically active on their campus - and what doesn't? Furthermore, how does political ideology and discourse manifest itself among its students and campus organizations? These are the questions we investigated as we studied the current political climate on St. Olaf campus. We explored the active participation of students within the political sphere through involvement in politically affiliated organizations, campaigns, and attendance at speakers. Consequently, we hoped to disclose the hybrid political identity that surrounds the college campus and the factors that influence it to form in such a way. We also chose to analyze the level of political "openness" and "awareness" that the campus exhibited, among students, faculty and within the classroom. Combining together what the others have said reveals the overall perception that St. Olaf is generally a politically liberal campus. While a majority believes this makes a campus more "open" those with conservative views feel

constrained within this environment as it does not allow all views to be represented, especially when there is a fear of being ostracized for challenging the common political opinion. As a result, the dialogue seems to be less “open” than it actually seems, but that fact goes unnoticed by a large majority of the campus. We suggest that there be increasing development towards expressing all views, including more awareness of students that there are other political opinions other than the common majority, and students can foster that through asking others and attending political events to note that there is political difference on campus.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Interview Questions**

1. What is your major?
2. What year are you?
3. Have you ever voted in an election?
4. Is there a political party you affiliate with? If so, would you like to tell me?
5. What are some adjectives that describe you politically?
6. How do you believe your upbringing has influenced your political ideas?
7. How do you believe your individual school system experiences have influenced your political ideas?
8. What political affiliation do you associate with the campus?students?faculty?
9. Are you involved in any political organizations on campus? How would you define your political engagement on campus?
10. Have you attended a political debate on campus or a PAC speaker? What was your experience like?
11. Do you believe Saint Olaf has enough resources to help students become politically involved/aware?
12. Are there any political or social issues that you feel are not adequately covered in Saint Olaf's curriculum?
13. Are there any social or political issues that you believe are not addressed by students or student groups?
14. Are there any political or social issues that you do not feel comfortable bringing up to other Saint Olaf students?
15. Do you ever feel overly pressured to be "politically correct?" Either in class or with your friends? Can you give me an example?
16. Have you ever been in a class where politics came up and other students or the professor felt uncomfortable? Did the professor continue/make it worse?
17. Do you think the attitudes of students come to resemble those of their professors?
18. Is there anything you would like to add?