

# Perspectives on Diversity at St. Olaf College

---

An Ethnographic Study

**Domonick Fields, Rachel Johnson, Benjamin Taylor**

**5/21/2012**

# Perspectives on Diversity at St. Olaf College

## An Ethnographic Study

Domonick Fields, Rachel Johnson, Ben Taylor

### Abstract:

The purpose of this research was to learn how different individuals engage with the term and experience the concept of *diversity* at St. Olaf College. It focuses on the difference in definitions and perceptions of diversity among the students, faculty, and staff of the St. Olaf College community. Information gathered through interviews and participant observations were combined with theoretical understandings and research on race and multiculturalism to understand how diversity is perceived on campus. Further, it looked into the role of membership in multicultural organizations in shaping students' experiences and views of diversity. We found that the definition of diversity used by a majority of participants was far broader than their actual perception of diversity, which was primarily limited to race. These findings illustrate the broad differences in opinions that contribute to the diversity discussion at the college and suggest possible solutions for increasing awareness of diversity within the St. Olaf community.

### Main Points:

- Diversity is *defined* by the St. Olaf Community as a broad range of human differences manifested in individuals; yet, diversity is *perceived* by the St. Olaf Community as a small range of differences, especially race, ethnicity, national origin, and religion
- Using race to identify individuals is problematic as it carries a variety of assumptions that are not necessarily accurate about a person's individual characteristics and experience
- The focus on race at St. Olaf College is a reflection of a broader United States mentality based on historical conceptions and ideologies
- People who do not fit into the category expected of them experience simultaneous assuming and questioning of their identity
- While the St. Olaf community considers whites to be diverse, the community is also thought to overlook their contributions to diversity
- The heritage of St. Olaf College as a Norwegian Lutheran school is thought to hinder diversification by students, but thought to facilitate it by faculty.
- Students resisted the idea of top-down approaches to creating a better understanding of diversity; however, they continually utilized top-down strategies in their ideas for improvement
- The role of Admissions in facilitating diversity was continually cited as a place of necessity and skepticism: there are concerns that Admissions' efforts are not genuine, but rather motivated by numbers and collegiate acclaim

# Perspectives on Diversity at St. Olaf College

## An Ethnographic Study

Domonick Fields, Rachel Johnson, Ben Taylor

### Setting/Community:

St. Olaf College is a private, Norwegian, Lutheran affiliated, liberal arts college in southern Minnesota. It is located in the town of Northfield, Minnesota, which has a population of 20,007 residents. Within the 3113-person student body, St. Olaf College is almost equally comprised of male and female students, the majority of whom are white. Recent Administrative efforts have focused on increasing diversity in the student population. As a result, approximately 15% of the student body is comprised of those considered to be racially diverse, that is people who do not identify themselves as white.

St. Olaf College's mission statement states that:

St. Olaf College strives 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; 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 2012)

In accordance with these beliefs, the college's leadership believes that increasing the diversity of the community, including that of students, faculty, and staff, is an essential component of achieving these goals. Yet, despite proclamations and intentions of upholding the mission

statement, tensions can arise between the college's desire to accept a higher number of racially and socio-economically diverse students and its need to remain fiscally solvent.

The 2010-2011 St. Olaf College Profile showed that the operating budget of St. Olaf is \$120.8 million and that the college has \$505.6 million in total assets. It received \$11.1 million in gifts, and the college profile says nothing about investments. There is an endowment of \$110,636 per student, and with 3113 students that comes to a total of \$344 million in endowments. The comprehensive fee to attend St. Olaf College is \$46,950. Financial Aid distributed a total of \$47.5 million, with an average Need-Based Aid amount of \$27,866. Approximately 84% of students in the 2010-2011 academic year received need-based aid. As these numbers demonstrate, even though the college is certainly well-endowed it still has a high operating cost. Thus, the college depends on receiving as much tuition as possible. For this reason, it could be tempting to accept a higher number of students who can afford to pay a larger percentage of their tuition. One result of the increased need to accept as many "full-pay" or reduced-aid students is that such recruitment is likely to favor students of similar backgrounds, ones who will not be considered diversifying influences to the college or the majority of the current student body.

However, this tension does not stop the college from promoting an awareness of diversity within the student body. One way they attempt to instill this consciousness is through academics. Many classes in the Sociology/Anthropology department and many others, especially departments within the humanities, deal specifically with topics related to diversity and offer chances to explore the way diversity, or the lack of it, has impacted the development of particular fields and phenomena. Such courses are in keeping with the college's efforts to increase the diversity of its population.

In keeping with the mission statement, St. Olaf College also provides learning opportunities regarding issues of diversity through the variety of organizations it supports. Many of these groups are led by students and seek to increase the discussion around diversity and to provide a support network for minorities in the St. Olaf population. The majority of these organizations are focused on racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, rather than other types of diversity. Such organizations include TRiO and Student Support Services (SSS), the Office of Multicultural Affairs & Community Outreach (MACO), Presente, Hmong Culture Outreach, and Harambee, among several others. Many of these organizations allow and welcome any student who is interested in its particular culture to join. However, membership in the majority of these multicultural organizations is often almost exclusively people who belong to the respective groups that the organizations represent. Such limited participation in these organizations indicates that there is a gap between the academic discussion of diversity that occurs in the classroom and the diversity of social life in the St. Olaf College community.

In particular, very few white students are often involved in a direct way with multicultural organizations. Banks (2009) found that a majority of white college students at another predominantly white, residential, liberal arts college also indicated a lack of active participation in multicultural events, suggesting a common pattern throughout the United States and not solely confined to the students of St. Olaf College. Although the students who participated in Banks' (2009) research were uninvolved with "diversity organizations", they maintained that they were still a part of diversity, but few could easily explain how they fit into the diversity scene outside of race. Because of the variety of intentions and actualities regarding diversity at St. Olaf College, we were motivated to investigate how the St. Olaf community thinks about the issue.

## Methodology:

In order to shape our interview questions, we consulted literature that focused on the term *diversity*, especially as it pertains to colleges. The questions that we formed were aimed at discerning the meaning of diversity within the St. Olaf College mentality and the role that people of the community believe it plays on campus. Using these questions we conducted 30 interviews with St. Olaf students, faculty, administration, and staff, all of which lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.

In addition to these interviews, we spent time observing several of the numerous student-led and college-established multicultural organizations on campus. These participant observations were one of our primary resources that helped us understand how these small communities are similar to, and how they differ from the St. Olaf community as a whole. We attended a Presente meeting, multiple Viva la Raza events (also hosted by Presente), and a Harambee meeting. We also observed students and staff in the TRiO and Student Support Services (SSS) office, the Office of Multicultural Affairs & Community Outreach (MACO) and the International Student Lounge. We conducted these observations in order to gain an insider perspective on how each organization worked. However, it was evident early on that we were not the regular students often associated with these spaces. Consequently, we were seen as outsiders which may have limited our observational results.

We also attempted to interview a diverse array of perspectives within the St. Olaf population. We sought out representatives of the aforementioned multicultural organizations as well as students who described themselves as uninvolved in these organizations in order to see how their views on diversity differed. As researchers, we had access to the student body and staff through email. This helped us gather a large number of willing participants in a short amount of

time. However, we received more responses from students with whom we had previously interacted for other reasons. As a result, our participants do not represent a random sample of the St. Olaf community, limiting the generalizability of our results (Berg 2006).

Our research was further limited by the time constraints of conducting research in the spring semester. While part of our research did seek to examine this variety of understandings, due to time constraints, we chose to redefine our analytical framework to primarily focus on the interplay of race and diversity and how the institutional creation of diversity is understood within the college community. Therefore, our analytical framework did not fully address the broad range of elements that contribute to diversity that many of our participants mentioned. Before we could begin our own investigation, we had to gain a background understanding of how to carry out ethnographic research. We then conducted a review of literature to help determine what has been discovered in past research and how our work could expand those discoveries. However, because spring semester is a busy time for many students, by the time our group was ready to begin conducting interviews and participant observations, many multicultural groups were already finished hosting events for the year. Our research was also limited by the interviewees' wariness of describing diversity. While conducting our interviews we noticed that many participants were nervous and fearful of saying the wrong thing. While such observations do offer valuable insight, this nervousness also prevented some interviews from developing into candid conversations about diversity. Further, because diversity is such a politically charged subject, participants may have been influenced to tell us what they believe the "correct" answer was rather than what they truly believe. Additionally, we were unable to find many students who would describe themselves as "uninvolved" in multicultural organizations, who were willing to

participate in our research. This response bias may have influenced our findings in a way that led our results to be more academically and socially accepted.

### Problem & Literature Review:

The class of 2015 is the most diverse class in St. Olaf's history. According to the college's "Enrollment Profile" the class is more multiculturally, geographically, and religiously diverse than any previous year (St. Olaf College 2012). In the past few years the college has continued diversifying its student population through an expanded TRiO program, increased international recruitment, and an effort to attract students who are considered "racially diverse."

In the article *Rethinking College Opportunities and Outcomes*, the authors find that "a large share of students assume from a young age that they will attend college [especially] white, native-born children of college-educated parents" (Long 2010). Programs such as TRiO provide opportunities for disadvantaged students to also attend college when they would otherwise be unable or less able to attend college. Though these TRiO programs are not designed to specifically help racial minorities, the students served are first generation students and students from low income backgrounds which are predominantly racial minorities due to perpetual social hierarchies (Minnesota TRiO). These programs, in conjunction with the college's diversity quotas, directly impact the percentage of racially diverse students at St. Olaf.

In addition to the TRiO programs, St. Olaf College intentionally recruits multicultural and socioeconomically diverse students. The college sends Admissions recruiters all around the country and the world in order to reach out to the widest variety of prospective students as possible. To facilitate this process, out of eleven St. Olaf Admissions officers employed by the college, two are solely charged with multicultural and international student recruitment. St. Olaf

also offers specific scholarships to students belong to underrepresented groups in the St. Olaf community.

Once these students arrive at St. Olaf, the college takes steps to ensure their success throughout their four years. The college invites these students to campus one month before classes start. During this time these students take a college course to prepare them for college level work and learn valuable time management and study skills. Thompson (1999) found that retention rates of minority students at predominantly white institutions were dependent on not only academic acclimation but equally and sometimes even more on social adjustment and comfort. According to Kwon (2009), this is especially true for international students. It was for this reason that the month prior to the start of the academic year at St. Olaf was established for the TRiO/SSS and International students. This time gives them the opportunity to get accustomed to campus and develop relationships that will make them more likely to complete their four years. Additionally, St. Olaf created the International Student Lounge and the MACO Lounge as places where international and multicultural students can spend time with students of similar backgrounds. Previous research has shown that such spaces can offer a sanctuary for groups classified as “others” which can positively affect attitudes and student exploration of their ethnic heritage and identity (Milem et. al 2005).

Multicultural students at St. Olaf also have the opportunity to address their needs and concerns within the context of student led multicultural organizations such as Harambee and Presente. These organizations provide a way for multicultural students to raise awareness about their specific culture in the broader St. Olaf community. They also provide a forum for voicing concerns and receiving advice regarding their situation as minorities at the college. These organizations can also serve to create ties between different cultural groups. Student from

varying ethnic and racial backgrounds can unite through these venues, serving to create a sense of solidarity between all minority groups in a predominately white space. As Milem et. al (2005) further explained, student interaction of this nature is important because “friendship represents the context of racial contact that is most likely to be characterized by equal status between individuals.” Such equal status is important to facilitate an improved diversity discussion at St. Olaf College.

Although active participation in multicultural organizations often creates enclaves of ethnic and racial minorities, diversity awareness events offer the opportunity for the entire St. Olaf community to participate in multicultural experiences. Such events include International Night, Hmong New Year Celebrations, Diwali, and Asia Week. These events explore identities and heritages of different diverse groups. However, such events are often most successful when they are only cultural displays or when they offer free food. For instance, multicultural speakers are often poorly attended by students that do not belong to the sponsor organization.

Despite all of the efforts enacted by the college and its minority students, tensions still exist within the student body about what diversity truly is and what role it should play in shaping the community. An example of this occurred only two years ago when the Board of Regents Student Committee put up posters between Buntrock Commons and Rolvaag Memorial Library asking the campus community, “What Does Diversity Mean to You?” Many responses were derogatory and hurtful statements directed towards members of racial and ethnic minorities, such as “You only got into St. Olaf cuz of affirmative action u dumb fuck” and “Diversity is code for anti-white racism.” The offensive messages displayed by anonymous members of the community demonstrate that the college’s goal to provide students with a diverse perspective of the world has not been entirely successful. Although no one can ascertain the prevalence of the ignorant

beliefs demonstrated by the remarks due to their anonymity, they nevertheless reveal that an increased number of diverse students does not necessarily lead to a higher understanding of diversity.

The principle goal of our project was to address this apparent gap between what the community says about diversity and the true way that diversity is involved in everyday campus life. As such, our research examines the difference in the way that diversity is understood in the academic realm of the classroom and how it is understood through the social interactions of the St. Olaf community. The focus of this study seeks to address the ways that different members of the St. Olaf College community perceive and interact with diversity on a daily basis.

## Findings and analysis:

### *Diversity as Difference*

We began each interview with the question, “What do you consider diversity to mean or be?” Nearly all of our participants believed that diversity is some version of what one interviewee called “the full richness of human difference in every measure.” Some stated this sentiment less eloquently, calling it, “different backgrounds and experiences” or just, “people who are different than you.” After clarifying that *diversity* meant *all* differences between any individuals, each participant elaborated on specific types of contributors to diversity. In those elaborations our interviewees included the categories: race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, class and socioeconomic status, language(s) and dialect(s), national origin, biodiversity, dietary choices (vegetarian, omnivore, vegan, etc.), mental and physical capability, age, geographical or regional origin, family structure and upbringing, interests, attitudes and opinions, political identification, culture, lifestyle, extracurricular activities,

educational level and background, and immigrant status. Of these, the most commonly identified “diversity factors” were: race, ethnicity, national origin, and, slightly less often, sexuality, gender identity, and religion.

After seeing the list of various factors reported to comprise diversity at St. Olaf College, it is evident that the community has a broad *definition* of diversity. However, the *perception* of diversity at St. Olaf College is far narrower. When asked for examples of diversity or diverse experiences, nearly every individual used race or ethnicity to illustrate diversity. Often, respondents explained their choice without prompting. For example, one white student explained that it was easier to see that someone looked different from her at first glance than it was to know their socioeconomic status. This tendency to identify race can also be seen as a social construction that Western culture has created, one in which skin color comes to be considered a natural descriptor of race and is then equated with diversity.

*Race* incorporates a combination of stereotypical physical as well as mental assumptions meant to classify individuals into distinguishable groups. The term *race* refers to conceptualized abstract ideas of a culture or a nation, molded into a tangible set of characteristics (McLarty & Xiong 2011). The definitions of race seem like “natural” differences because of their supposed basis in genetics. However, race is a highly ideological notion constructed to achieve political ends (Nealon & Giroux 2012: 193). “Natural” descriptors such as skin color are socially constructed means of identification that enable individuals to group those around them into “who we resemble and from whom we differ” (Jenkins 2002). Racial hierarchies are often determined by the dominant group in power so as to provide certain privileges to them and limitations to the “others” based on each individual’s specific race.

The social construction of race is problematic because its meaning is not always clear to every individual involved, and is a narrative that involves many assumptions. Identifying an individual by race allows the identifier to simultaneously make assumptions about the person's socioeconomic status, where they come from, what they have done in their life, and many other stereotypes that our culture teaches us is the norm for each particular race. As the Assistant to the President for Institutional Diversity pointed out, "it must be hard to be a poor and white student here. They are perceived to have the privilege, but they don't have it." Even though, as the majority, white individuals are not often identified within the context of "race," there is still an implicit assumption that all white students at St. Olaf College are from wealthy backgrounds. These assumptions might not be true for an individual white student on campus, but this is still an identity to which they must adapt. Further, grouping individuals according to race ignores their different backgrounds. For example, an African American student will have experienced different opportunities and racial stereotypes than a black student from Africa. However, based on race, both individuals would be labeled "black" and subject to inaccurate assumptions.

The Assistant to the President for Institutional Diversity explained the focus on race as a result of the history of the United States, which has traditionally placed a great deal of emphasis on race, especially for African Americans. American history does help explain our culture's use of race as a descriptor and also its problem as a way to define diversity. Several decades after the end of slavery, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s exposed the nature and issues of racial discrimination. Famous examples of these issues include "Whites Only" water fountains and businesses that openly stated, "This establishment does not serve coloreds." Interestingly, in the Deep South, where segregation was most rampant, whites were actually in the minority in terms of population and often economically impoverished. This lack of numbers and, at times,

economic capital made establishing a system of racial domination of the utmost importance to the whites of the South. During this time, race and racism were how Americans talked about the issue, as skin color was a blatant and easy way for those in power to segregate blacks and thus maintain power. One interesting feature of this time is that “race” was almost exclusively focused on whites and blacks, even though issues regarding Native Americans were occurring during the same time period (Roark et. al 2009).

One concept of American racial constructs that began with slavery but continues even today is that of hypodescent, also known as the “one-drop rule.” The idea that one black ancestor makes a person black whether or not they manifested the phenotypic traits associated with blackness, indicates an early awareness that someone’s physical appearance does not necessarily provide an accurate description of their background. However, even though a person was, and sometimes still is, considered black regardless of their appearance, a phenomenon now known as *colorism* dictates that individuals with lighter skin receive certain privileges and advantages (Herring, Keith & Horton 2004). As Burdick (1998) shows, there is a notable difference between the experiences of black women and racially diverse women who appear whiter (139). People who encounter women of different shades of “color” make assumptions about them based on their physical appearance, which influences their interactions.

An example of how these ideas dating back to slave times still have a place in the collective consciousness and discourse of American society and the St. Olaf community is that of mixed race individuals. In one interview, a biracial student with one white and one black parent reported people asking her multiple times if she was “really black,” saying things like, “You don’t dress like a black person – you dress like a white girl.” They also told her that she did not sound black, simultaneously assuming and denying her racial identity. These comments

concerning a “black” image demonstrate the inaccuracies that accompany the social construction of race that the St. Olaf community follows.

Such assumptions are in opposition to how our participants defined diversity, because they assumed that all members of each race will offer the college community the same perspective, regardless of their different backgrounds. Further, the use of race to portray diversity also minimizes the array of contributions that whites bring to campus because of how diversity is advertised. Despite many of our participants including whites in their understanding of diversity, they believed the college portrayed diversity in similar terms to one participant’s description, “diversity is the percentage of non-whites.” As the majority group, they felt that their contributions to campus diversity were often overlooked because they represented the “norm,” illustrating that whites were subject to similar assumptions as other racial groups, that every white student contributed the same perspective.

When race is equated with diversity, the majority group, in this case white students, can lose recognition of their diversity in relation to minorities. As one black respondent said, “Whites are only diverse because of socioeconomic diversity.” While every participant did acknowledge that whites were part of diversity, they all included qualifiers such as, “and whites are part of diversity too” or, “they have backgrounds or whatever.” These comments reveal an excepted position of whites within the diversity discussion. However, the conversation about race and racism in America has been replaced by the terms *multicultural* and *diversity*. Whites want to be included under these terms because otherwise they risk exclusion, which is traditionally associated with lack or loss of power through marginalization.

In our interviews, participants also used *race* and *ethnicity* as interchangeable representations of diversity. However, as we have already explained, race is a social construction

developed around appearance. In contrast, ethnicity “refers to a subset of people whose members share common national, ancestral, cultural, immigration, or religious characteristics that distinguish them from other groups” (Daniel 2002). The lack of differentiation between ethnicity and race by the participants in our research is problematic for understanding diversity because in the United States there is a strong association between *ethnic* and *minority* (Jenkins 2002). The association between *race*, *ethnicity*, and *diversity* is likely to exclude white people from perceptions of diversity at St. Olaf because the terms are strongly associated with *minority*, and whites are not the minority. Further, as Geertz described, “ethnicity is personal identity collectively ratified and publically expressed” (quoted in Jenkins 2002: 119). Because whites are the dominant ethnic group at St. Olaf, the collective ratification of their personal identities is often understated in diversity discussions since many of our practices and institutions are set up around a white male norm (Nealon & Giroux 2012: 56).

Another interesting finding in our research is the difference of opinion about how the heritage of St. Olaf College plays into the experience of diversity in the community. Surprisingly, over half of our interviewees, including students, faculty, and staff, explicitly brought up the legacy of St. Olaf College’s Norwegian Lutheran heritage in relation to the composition of its community. Students overwhelmingly saw it as a hindrance to the school’s attempt to diversify its student body (none remarked on diversification of faculty or staff). The majority of them cited the Scandinavian roots of the college as creating a nearly inescapable image that the St. Olaf student body is “the whitest of the white.” There is a perception that everyone who goes to this school is Norwegian or Lutheran, and students largely believe that this image keeps people who “don’t fit it” from considering that they might belong in this community. When it is believed that the college is simply filling itself with Norwegian Lutherans

by importing legacy students who share the same characteristics as their predecessors, it causes people who do not share that particular background, especially students of different races and religions to look at the college and think “Why would I go there?” This skepticism about the college’s racial, ethnic, and religious heritage reported by a majority of the students we interviewed was imagined to be a primary cause of the “lack of diversity” that so many students perceived.

Faculty members, on the other hand, were almost all of the opinion that the college’s heritage, particularly as a Lutheran school set up to help immigrants to the United States, is a facilitator to the diversity on campus. The most cited reason was what one professor called the “ethic of being an immigrant college.” St. Olaf College was founded in 1874 “[out of] the Norwegian immigrant desire for higher learning” (St. Olaf College 2012). It was a college of immigrants, by immigrants, for immigrants. Although that history was particular to the Norwegian community of Minnesota in the late 1800s, the professors we interviewed connected that history to St. Olaf College’s continuing service to immigrants to the United States. One professor stated, “It’s because of our history as an immigrant college that we still have 1/5th of the student body who are immigrants or children of immigrants.” She saw the college’s continuing outreach to immigrants as a huge factor in making the college a more diverse place.

The other oft-cited aspect of the college’s heritage that faculty members saw as adding to the diversity on campus was its Lutheran identity. Professors brought up two ways that the religious identity of the school enhanced the experience of diversity at St. Olaf College. The first way that the Lutheranism of St. Olaf was seen as adding to the college’s experience of diversity was the theoretical aspect of the faith. The importance of “loving across difference” and an ethic of service to others are both inherent to the Lutheran faith and have been incorporated into the

college's mission to create "citizens of the world." The "College of the Church" page on St. Olaf's website states that "As the St. Olaf community embraces its Christian heritage and engages in interfaith dialogue and activity, so also does it strive to be an inclusive community of various faith traditions, beliefs, and backgrounds." This is an example of the idea that although the college is "rooted in the Lutheran tradition" it is not exclusively Lutheran, nor exclusively Christian, and it strives to utilize Lutheran values to create understanding and bonds between the diverse faiths that the campus supports (St. Olaf College 2012).

The second aspect of St. Olaf's faith tradition that professors brought up as an addition to diversity was the practical side. The Lutheran church is "a church of the world," and, as such, St. Olaf's status as a Lutheran school attracts students and faculty from all over the world. One professor brought up the fact that there are more Lutherans in Africa today than there are in Scandinavia. Indeed, within the top 18 countries with the highest population of Lutherans, every inhabited continent or region is represented. One can imagine that a Lutheran from Papua New Guinea would have many diverse qualities from a Lutheran from Brazil or Germany (The Lutheran World Federation 2010). At St. Olaf College, we have several international students from Tanzania who report having come here because they wanted to attend a school connected to their Lutheran faith. Hence, although attracting Lutheran students might not explicitly increase religious diversity on campus, the fact that these Lutheran students come from all parts of the world increases other types of diversity including, though not exclusively, ethnicity, national origin, family structure, lifestyle, language, and culture.

The difference between faculty and student evaluations of St. Olaf's religious and ethnic heritage illustrate what we believe are cognitively dissonant gaps in understandings of diversity among the student body. Although students espouse beliefs that diversity is, "not an all or

nothing, black or white thing,” and that it exists within every group because, “each individual is diverse in their own right,” in practice, they seem to ignore those beliefs in favor of homogenizing tactics that reduce people to groups and labels. Instead of utilizing their idea that diversity necessarily arises within a group and applying it to the context of St. Olaf College’s heritage and its legacy, students diminish the potential of the college’s history by claiming that everyone attracted for related reasons fits into a single, homogenous, non-diverse group, when in fact such a view is oversimplified.

### *Institutionalized Diversity*

Students also believed that it was necessary for diversity to be promoted by student-driven efforts from the bottom-up rather than through institution-driven efforts from the top-down. Among their complaints, students cited that few people attended many multicultural events and that, “Admissions is only concerned with diversity as a way to meet quotas.” To be fair, as one professor pointed out, there would be even fewer minority students at St. Olaf if the college did not actively recruit them. Despite the need for students to encourage diversity, very few had any ideas of how to do this from the bottom-up rather than the current top-down structure. The few suggestions students had often relied on improving existing institutional methods of creating diversity. For example, one white student criticized the structured nature of Residence Life diversity awareness events in favor of more natural discussion. However, when asked how she would improve understandings of diversity on campus she suggested conducting more Residence Life sponsored panels. Despite students favoring an individualistic, bottom-up approach, many admitted they had never or very rarely spoke to their friends about life before

college and even fewer had approached a stranger to simply introduce themselves since Week One.

Among international students, this lack of discussion about their backgrounds was perceived as disinterest in their culture. One international student said that, “American students need to make an effort to speak with the international students,” but also admitted that the problem often became one of ignorance from both cultures. “Americans sometimes insult students with what international students perceive as a ‘clash,’ but these students are often not familiar with American culture and don’t understand this is just the way Americans are.” As an example of these “clashes” the student described how large group events, such as playing Frisbee, had the possibility for a cultural gap. “International students often feel left out from these events and the Americans should make an effort to include them, but sometimes the international students need to realize that it is okay to ask to join.” This illustrates that the issue is not the fault of any specific group, but rather a mutual problem that needs to be collectively addressed.

When interviewees were asked whose priority the discussion of diversity should be, many interviewees believed that it should be that of the faculty and staff. As one respondent said, “Students shouldn’t have to worry about educating a community on something that should already be taught.” However, they did believe that students should participate and help with teaching diversity; it just should not be the priority of the students. One staff member justified this view saying, “In the four years that you are here, yes you may be able to build a foundation and teach younger students about diversity, but after you graduate, your work goes with you.” Along these lines, several students described how it was important to “actively seek out diversity.” However, they also admitted that they rarely, if ever, intentionally sought out these

diversifying situations. Rather, they relied on the same institutional structures that they had previously criticized to present them with these opportunities.

The same question also prompted participants to speak about how St. Olaf College could better teach diversity on campus. Many participants cited Student Support Services (SSS) as an example of staff educating the campus about diversity. One faculty member believed that there needed to be an emphasis on hiring faculty and staff who are not white. He believed that if this were to happen, then the campus would “buy into the concept of diversity and may demand it to be a major priority.” However, St. Olaf already has a faculty committee dedicated to hiring people of diverse backgrounds. In the past decade the college has created the position Assistant to the President for Institutional Diversity, who is charged with increasing diversity among the student body and within the faculty and staff.

Although many of our interviewees’ opinions differed regarding the themes previously discussed, the role of Admissions in diversity at St. Olaf College was a common theme in every interview we conducted. Each participant agreed that Admissions played an essential role in increasing diversity on campus because, as one professor stated, “Who else brings students to the college?” However, the majority of participants were skeptical about what the motive behind Admissions’ recruitment of students of diverse backgrounds truly was. One participant described the St. Olaf Admissions page as a “false advertisement.” He claimed that “every diverse student who ever attended St. Olaf is on the website or in a brochure.” Many other interviewees echoed his description. They believed that the problem is not that there are pictures of racially diverse students, but that the website is outdated and misleading, in that many of the students featured on it have already graduated. When searching the site as a high school student, one interviewee

believed that the campus would be very diverse. However, upon arrival the student realized that this was not the case.

This divergence between how St. Olaf advertises itself and how it actually exists can be seen as an attempt to preemptively create an image of its ideal state in order to achieve that goal. This “reflexive production and circulation of images” makes the institution seem to exist in a diverse state “prior to and independent of those images” which helps to produce the attributes they already appear to have (Strassler 2010: 4). Many students believe that the college’s ideal state would be an increasingly diverse community. However, because the college relies on photos to market and create an image of diversity on campus, it favors racial diversity over other types of diversity, which may play a role in our participants’ tendency to perceive diversity in racial terms.

Many participants saw bottom-line numbers as the primary motivation behind Admissions’ diversification efforts. Since colleges with higher racial, ethnic, and other diversity ratios receive monetary grants as well as acclaim in the academic community, it is believed that “Admissions is only looking to put numbers on paper.” Although diversity on campus is higher than it’s ever been, many claimed that it is still not enough. “Yeah, it looks good on paper, but when I go to class I only see one black student,” reported one white student. Thus, even though “diversity” is at an all-time high in terms of numbers, our participants believed that Admissions had not done enough to make sure that there was a substantial increase in diversifying the student body. One professor said that, “When St. Olaf is at about 30% diversity, then that is when I will agree that they are serious about getting diversity on campus.”

## Summary and Conclusions:

Based on our findings, we believe that St. Olaf's understanding of diversity is increasing, albeit slowly. Despite a tendency for participants to perceive diverse moments as those featuring racial diversity, every participant defined diversity as a combination of elements in an individual's background. Further, very few individuals possessed a negative view of diversity or the discussion around the term.

Though we discovered many various sub-themes in our interviews as described above, the overarching theme was one of cognitive dissonance between beliefs about diversity and perceptions of diversity. By and large, respondents defined the term as an incredibly broad category with near-limitless manifestations. However, when describing their experiences with diversity at St. Olaf, the majority of respondents characterized diversity as limited. Respondents failed to see diversity *within* groups in favor of emphasizing diversity *between* groups. Because of the extent to which the community struggles to place whites into the overall diversity discussion, there is an increased focus on diversity within the white community. However, when discussing the diversity of minority racial groups, they are measured in comparison to the white majority, causing this emphasis on difference between groups. This same pattern manifested itself again in terms of "solutions" to the "diversity issue" at St. Olaf. Respondents claimed to favor bottom-up approaches to creating a healthy perception and experience of diversity on campus, but they suggested top-down strategies when prompted further. Again, they ignored the very same principles they had previously touted.

Based on our analysis of our findings we also suggest that students take a more active role in attempting to increase diversity on campus. Many students expressed the belief that they would come across diversity without searching for it. However, when pressed, most of these students admitted that this was rarely the case. We suggest that students continue to introduce

themselves to fellow members of the St. Olaf community and that they show interest in learning more about their friends' backgrounds. We hope that through increased personal conversations, the overall discussion of diversity at St. Olaf may be improved.

We further suggest that future research examine how diversity is increased on campus. Our research focused on the *perception* of diversity at St. Olaf, but there may be a difference between the perception of diversity and its actuality. Such research would be beneficial to improving the community's understanding of diversity because it could illuminate the extent to which diversity is incorporated into the college's goals and community life, which would make the overall process of increasing diversity more transparent. With more transparency, there would likely be less skepticism within the student body regarding the institutional measures that the college has taken.

Additionally, we suggest that our research be conducted again, but over a broader time span. With more time our team would have liked to speak with representatives from more multicultural organizations to better understand how active participation in awareness events can change an individual's perspective of diversity. There could also be comparisons made between the perspectives of members of different organizations.

Although our research had various limiting factors, we nevertheless believe that it reveals important aspects of the perception and experience of diversity at St. Olaf College. Our research revealed that the current discussion around diversity is having beneficial results. Our study also produced suggestions for the improvement of this discussion that, if heeded, could result in the achievement of the college's mission to create "responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world."

Word Count: 7,048

## Works Cited

- Banks, Kira H. 2009. "A Qualitative Investigation of White Students' Perceptions of Diversity." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 2(3), pp.149-55. American Psychological Association, Retrieved 5/20/2012, from APA Psych Net.
- Berg, Bruce L. 2007. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 6ed. Ann Arbor: Pearson.
- Burton, Lauren M., Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Victor Ray, Rose Buckelew, & Elizabeth Hordge Freeman. 2010. "Rethinking Racism." *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 3(72), 440-59.
- Burdick, J. (1998). *Blessed Anastacia: Women, race and popular Christianity in Brazil*. London: Rutledge.
- Daniel, G. Reginald. 2002. *More than Black?: Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Herring, Cedric, Verna Keith & Hayward Horton. 2004. *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Colorblind" Era*. Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy.
- Jenkins, Richard. 2002. "Imagined, but Not Imaginary: Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Modern World." MacClancy, Jeremy (Ed.) *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Kwon, Yangyi. (2009)"Factors Affecting International Students' Transition to Higher Education Institutions in the United States. -From the Perspective of Office of International Students." *College Student Journal* 43(4). pp.1020-036.
- Levine, Arthur. 1993. *Higher Learning in America, 1980-2000*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Long, Mark C., & Marta Tienda. 2010. *Beyond Admissions: Re-thinking College Opportunities and Outcomes*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Lutheran World Federation. 2011. "Summary of Lutheran World Federation Statistics". WEBSITE 5/20/2012 <http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Summary-of-LWF-2010-Statistics>
- McLarty Katherine & Phoua Xiong. 2011. *Invisible Boundaries: Diversity in student Organizations*. St. Olaf College.
- Milem, J.F., Chang, M.J, & Antonio, 2005. *Making diversity work on Campus: A Research- based perspective*. Washington D.C.: American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Minnesota TRiO Association. 2012. *Minnesota TRiO Association*. Mid-American Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personnel. WEBSITE 5/20/12  
<http://www.mntrio.org>

Nealon, Jeffrey T., & Susan Searls Giroux. 2012. *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*. 2nd ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Print.

Roark, James L. 2009. *The American Promise: A History of the United States*. 4(2). Boston: Bedford St. Martins.

St. Olaf College. 2011 "Enrollment Profile." *St. Olaf College*.

---. 2012. *St. Olaf College* <http://www.stolaf.edu>

Strassler, Karen. 2010. *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Thompson, Jean N. 1999. *Exploring Diversity among African Students as a Predominantly White University*. Retrieved May 20 2012, from ProQuest Information & Learning.

## Appendix A:

### Interview Questions for Students:

1. What do you consider diversity to mean/be? Or, what does the word diversity mean to you?
2. What do you think the St. Olaf community considers diversity to mean/be?
3. What do you think this view(s) or meaning of diversity on campus comes from?
4. Do you think there are different ideas or definitions of diversity at St. Olaf, for example among the administration, faculty, students as a whole, and students of color (or particular groups of students)? Please explain.
5. Does St. Olaf value diversity? How so (what are some examples)?
  - Why do you think that it values diversity?
6. Do you think there should be more discussion about diversity on campus?
  - Why or why not?
7. Do you think that discussion of diversity on campus can ever have a negative effect on the atmosphere or experience of it here? Please explain.
8. Do you feel that the concept of diversity is ever used in problematic ways on campus?
  - If so, can you give examples of these, and who has used them that way?
9. How do you experience diversity daily at St. Olaf?
10. How do you fit into the concept of diversity at St. Olaf?
11. How do whites fit into your definition of diversity?
12. What patterns do you notice regarding racial or ethnic grouping on campus?
13. Describe an experience you have had that represents diversity at St. Olaf.

14. Is diversity a concept at St. Olaf that needs to be constructed or defined from the top-down or is diversity something that can be better created by individuals' actions, or the actions of student groups?

- In either case, what do you think would be the best way to create a better or clearer understanding/meaning of diversity on campus?

15. What is the role of diversity at St. Olaf?

16. Do you think St. Olaf sufficiently promotes diversity?

- If yes, how so?
- If not, how can they further/better promote it?

17. Are there any problems or limitations with the term "diversity" and "diverse"? If so, what are they?

- Are there any alternative terms that you think would be better than diversity and diverse? If so, what are they and what are their advantages?

18. In your view, is there ever a gap or conflict between official or community views and meanings of diversity and the experience of "diverse" members of the community (students, faculty, and staff)? Please explain.

## Appendix B:

### Interview Questions for Faculty:

1-18. See Appendix A

19. How does diversity in the classroom compare or relate to diversity in the community?

20. How do you see your role as contributing to diversity on campus?

21. How does diversity in the classroom compare or relate to diversity in the community?

22. What is the role of the classroom in understanding diversity?

23. What is the role of diversity in the classroom?

24. Outside of strictly teaching, how else do you interact with or get involved with diversity in your Olaf experience?