The Creative Class Returns to Northfield: Alumni Worker Profile

Avery Baird, Sarah Dugan, Kurt Hager, Katrina Puskala, Gillian Rendahl, and Kari Riley
In partnership with Ross Currier of the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation
St. Olaf College
So/An 373
5/21/12
Abstract:

This study investigated the economic potentials for the creative class workers in Northfield, Minnesota. Our group worked under the direction of Ross Currier from the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation. We were specifically interested in understanding why St. Olaf alumni returned to the community post-graduation, and how St. Olaf College might play a role in bringing them back. We conducted interviews with alumni and St. Olaf employees in person or over the telephone and used their responses to better understand this issue. Additionally, a survey was sent out to senior members of the St. Olaf student body to better understand their relationship to the Northfield community. Our primary results were that most alumni returned to Northfield due to the desire to raise a family in an ideal community. Amongst our interviewees there was not strong enthusiasm regarding the potential for the creative class in Northfield, rather the high quality of life in the town was what drew them back. In addition to our primary question, we also learned about Northfield in comparison to other surrounding communities, the relationship between the Northfield community and St. Olaf College, and tensions within the town surrounding economic development.

- Northfield is considered, by St. Olaf College alumni who have returned, to be an ideal place to raise a family due to reputable educational systems, safe neighborhoods, a close proximity to two liberal arts colleges, and the natural beauty of the town.
- The alumni who work in Northfield benefit from a community that is interested in art and culture, reliable social networks, and wealthier clientele than in surrounding communities.
- Alumni who work in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area appreciate the short commuting time and the picturesque small-town life Northfield offers.
- Among the alumni interviewed, there were some differences in view points about the economic direction that Northfield community should be headed towards. Some felt the town is too “elitist” in its business practices. Several alumni supported this statement by citing that there was hesitation towards Target and Cub Foods and stating that there are intellectually intelligent but slow-moving city politicians. Others disagreed, stating that there are other neighboring towns that would be more appealing to manufacturing industries and that the jobs established by the creative class will be the future of the town’s economy.
- Contrary to research, there did not seem to be a negative relationship between St. Olaf College and community members. In fact, many alumni cited their positive feelings about the College as a part of their decision to return to Northfield.
- Graduating seniors did not cite intent to return to Northfield in the next five years, but many were open to returning after getting married and preparing to start a family.
Abstract:
This study investigated the economic potentials for the creative class workers in Northfield, Minnesota. Working under the direction of Ross Currier from the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation, our group was specifically interested in understanding why St. Olaf alumni returned to the community post-graduation, and how St. Olaf College might play a role in bringing them back. We conducted interviews with alumni and St. Olaf employees in person or over the telephone and used their responses to better understand this issue. Additionally, a survey was sent out to senior members of the St. Olaf student body to better understand their relationship to the Northfield community. Our primary results were that most alumni returned to Northfield due to the desire to raise a family in an ideal community. Amongst our interviewees there was not strong enthusiasm regarding the potential for the creative class in Northfield. Rather, the high quality of life in the town is what drew them back. In addition to our primary question, we also learned about Northfield in comparison to other surrounding communities, the relationship between the Northfield community and St. Olaf College, and tensions within the town surrounding economic development.

Introduction

The research conducted by So/An 273 Ethnographic Research Methods students occurred in Northfield, in southeastern Minnesota, roughly 40 miles south of Minneapolis/St. Paul. The City of Northfield was founded in 1855 by John Wesley North. Originally from St. Anthony Falls, Minnesota, he was drawn to the fertile land that had been recently ceded by Dakota American Indians (Northfield Area Chamber, 2012). The Cannon River, which today flows through the center of the town, was valued for its hydropower potential. A flourmill was founded in 1919 and eventually became what is now known as Malt-o-Meal cereal factory, Northfield’s largest employer (Northfield Area Chamber, 2012).

According to data provided by the 2010 US Census, the population of Northfield is 20,007. Of this population, 88.8% describe themselves as White, 8.4% as Hispanic or Latino, 2.2% as bi-racial, 3.5% as Asian, 1.3% as Black, and 0.2% as American Indian or Alaska Native (2010 Census). 96% of residents have completed their high school education while 51% have completed their bachelor’s education or higher. The median income of a Northfield household in
2010 was $63,934 compared to the national average of $48,100. 8.3% of the population lives below the poverty line, which is a contrast to the 15.1% national average (2010 Census, CIA World Factbook, 2012).

Two educational institutions, Carleton College and St. Olaf College, were formed early in the town’s history and remain today. Initially known as Northfield College, Carleton College was founded in 1866 by the Minnesota Conference of Congregational Churches and is now one of the elite liberal arts colleges in the United States, drawing students from all over the country and internationally. St. Olaf College was established in 1874 by Norwegian immigrants as an institution to help assimilate Norwegian immigrants into American society. Today, St. Olaf College enrolls roughly 3,000 students and, along with Carleton, is one of the largest employers of Northfield residents (City of Northfield, 2012).

Northfield’s largest employers date back to shortly after the town’s foundation. Malt-O-Meal is the largest employer, today with 861 employees (2010 Census, 2012), St. Olaf College and Carleton College come in second with 830 employees and third with 690 employees, respectively (Chambers of Commerce, 2012). Northfield hospital, Northfield School District, McLane Minnesota, and Multek Flexible Circuits Inc. also employ a substantial number of employees, ranging from 542 to 430 employees (Chambers of Commerce, 2012). In addition to these large employers, there are 1,689 other firms and businesses in Northfield as of census data dating from 2007, 35.3% of which are owned by women.

The city of Northfield promotes specific qualities of the town to foster an increase in business, citing proximity to the cosmopolitan Metro area, liberal arts colleges, pro-green philosophies, plethora of mom-n-pop stores, nature, a highly educated and intelligent community, and quality K-12 education (NEC, 2012). Nonetheless, due to its proximity to
Minneapolis/St. Paul, Northfield has transitioned from an “isolated” small town to an ever popular “bedroom community” as it is an attractive residence for families in which one or more members may commute daily to the metro area.

The small downtown feel of Northfield is exemplified through the many boutiques, restaurants, firms and other small businesses located in the downtown of the city. Nonetheless, some ground has been lost in the introduction of a Cub Foods chain grocery store and a Target, an all-purpose shopping center in 2000. Many community members claimed that the big box businesses would threaten local businesses (indeed, Jacobson's Department Store, along with several other hardware stores went out of business in the months that followed Target's construction) while others argued it offered more products for Northfield citizens in general but also cheaper products for the poorer communities. A compromise allowed the construction of Target and Cub Foods if plans for an even larger shopping mall were abandoned. In direct response to this debate, the NDDC was formed.

For individuals who wish to start their own business in Northfield, they must work within the system provided by the Northfield Chamber of Commerce and the City Council. There are several groups in Northfield that work to promote economic success. They include the Northfield Economic Development Authority (EDA, 2012). This group provides loans and grants as well as other resources to those attempting to pursue economic success, as well as provide a larger tax base and additional job opportunities to citizens (NEC, 2012). The Northfield Enterprise Center is a non-profit organization that assists in all aspects of business planning and development as well as recruitment of businesses that may be looking to relocate (NEC, 2012).

The So/An 273 research group worked in partnership with the Northfield Downtown
Development Corporation, a group of Northfield citizens working “to realize the vision of a vibrant and vital downtown “ (NDDC, 2012). The NDDC was founded in 2000 in response to the introduction of large businesses such as Target and Cub Foods that may put local establishments at risk. The committee’s goal was to keep the downtown area vibrant and relevant to the lives of Northfield citizens. The committee has received substantial funding from the city of Northfield, receiving $20,000 in its first year as seed money (NDDC, 2012). The board has participated in various projects, such as the Downtown Strategies Committee and the Downtown Northfield Streetscape Framework Plan in 2006. There are three subcommittees within the group: The Economic Viability Committee, the Arts and Recreation Committee, and the Economic Expansion and Redevelopment Committee (NDDC, 2012).

**Problem:**

Members of So/An 273 Ethnographic Research Methods worked in partnership with the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation (NDDC, 2012). This initiative with the NDDC, lead by Mr. Ross Currier, Executive Director of the NDDC, aimed to investigate St. Olaf alumni who currently dwell in the city of Northfield and are classified under the label “creative class” or “knowledge workers”. The “creative class” is a term used to describe a specific demographic whose function is to create “meaningful new forms” in an economy, thereby creating growth and innovation (Florida, 2002). The committee’s goal was to better understand what factors influenced these alumni to remain in or return to Northfield after graduation. This research worked to better understand these factors and provide the committee with a resource that will aid them in taking action accordingly to capitalize on potential opportunities, influencing the creative class/knowledge workers to relocate to Northfield and contribute to
economic growth. It is the NDDC’s vision that St. Olaf students can be nurtured as potential social and economic capital for the city in the future.

The city of Northfield stands to benefit economically and socially from a better understanding of its current and future St. Olaf alumni. Currently, the concern is that there is too little interaction between students of St. Olaf College and the greater Northfield community, and that this lack of exposure and mutual understanding is preventing connections with the community and therefore, limiting the full economic potential of the town. The NDDC believes that students who graduate from liberal arts colleges, such as St. Olaf College, tend to have stronger tendencies for creative innovation, coupled with a desire to work for technology-based companies and other emerging industries. The NDDC is hoping to attract more of this type of worker in order to cultivate more economic growth found in the form of creative class/knowledge worker industries.

The Northfield community is eager to bring new business proposals initiated from within the community due to recent competition from “big-box” corporations that have threatened the “mom-’n-pop” feel Northfield prides itself upon. If Northfield were able to capitalize more on the constant influx of intelligent, eager, and creative floods of students that pass through Northfield every year, perhaps they could strengthen the small town focused business model. The high turnover rate of students also puts Northfield at an advantage as they are constantly exposed to all types of creative individuals and students who are masters of the latest technological, economic and political trends. While there may not be a large job market for students immediately post-graduation, the hope is that alumni will remember Northfield as a supportive and ideal community to develop or expand their future careers.

As members of So/An 273, we were attracted to this project because of our unique
perspective into the St. Olaf lifestyle and our desire to meet and connect with alumni. Our group is made up of both juniors and seniors and each one of us is preparing to soon enter the workforce. We were interested in talking with alumni and understanding what brought them back to Northfield after graduation, as well as learning about their career paths.

Additionally, as students we are familiar with the intimate workings of St. Olaf College, therefore we have access to student opinions on the city of Northfield, to the levels of engagement students adhere to, and to interviews with faculty and staff who specialize in career development and who represent the College to the local community. In short, we offer a unique perspective to help shape Mr. Currier’s and other board members’ findings and further research proposals.

**Literature Review and Theory**

*Defining and attracting the creative class*

The recent transformation of the US economy has been described by scholars and politicians as an “information economy,” an “internet economy,” or even a “post-industrial society”. Richard Florida has famously coined the term “creative economy,” which he argues is more inclusive. A fundamental point of his thesis is that as a society we are “shifting from an economy based on physical inputs—land, capital, and labor to an economy based on intellectual inputs, or human creativity” (Florida, 51). In other words, the creative economy relies less on geographic proximity to natural resources or tourist destinations; instead economic growth flourishes in locales that attract populations of highly educated and creative individuals. A key component of the theory is that high tech jobs will then follow these individuals, further adding to economic growth and high-wage jobs.
Florida divides the workforce into four classes: the service class, the working class, agricultural workers, and the creative class. In his research he further breaks down the creative class into two subgroups according to the type of creativity needed for their occupation, namely the “creative core” and the “creative professionals” (Bille, 470). The individuals Florida determines as the most creative are labeled the “creative core.” This group is defined by their creation of new forms or designs that improve future working practices. For example, people who generally fit this profile are commonly employed in technology, mathematics, architects and engineers, researchers, artists, designers, entertainment industries, media and advertising. (Bille 470). Next, Florida identifies a second group, the “creative professionals.” The work of creative professionals is characterized by problem solving, and very often their jobs require a high degree of education. For example, individuals labeled as creative professionals could include business and financial managers, legal professionals, medical professionals and people employed in high-tech industries. (Bille, 470).

Florida’s theory of economic growth through the creative class revolves around what he calls the “three T’s”: technology, talent and tolerance. “All growing, exciting, talent-magnet regions do all three things well” (Florida, 50). These places regularly invest in and utilize technology. They are equally proficient in attracting, utilizing, and retaining talent. However, this talent doesn’t come to concentrate in particular regions by coincidence. It is not necessarily born in a region nor does it necessarily stay there. “Talent is not a stock, it is a flow” (Bille, 471). Therefore, it is critical to either attract talented people or to “grow” them. Florida argues in order to do this a region must have tolerance. Florida particularly stresses the importance of tolerance. He argues the regions most open to different lifestyles and people who think or express their creativity differently “have the kind of ecosystem that attracts talented and entrepreneurial
people across the board (Florida, 37).”

The creative class comprises approximately one-third of the U.S. working population, a considerable proportion of the population as a whole. Therefore, it is important to understand the cultural activities and events creative class individuals enjoy. The creative class attends contemporary concerts, visits art museums and art exhibitions, uses the Internet, engages in free non-institutionalized, and visit libraries at a higher degree than the service class (Bille 475). Therefore, Florida argues, “the creative class prefer more active, authentic and participatory experiences... where it is hard to draw the line between participant and observer, or between creativity and its creator” (Florida, 32). City parks, off-road trails, and cycle lanes, high-tech workplaces, a blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, small galleries, and bistros are important elements in a region that help to attract the creative class.

In sum, his proposed formula for economic prosperity requires the development of tolerance and local amenities favored by the creative class. The creative class individuals will then seek out the desirable location, high-tech jobs will follow the new creative residents and spur economic growth. In the new era of knowledge industries, there are fewer restrictions on where economic activity locates (as compared to the proximity of natural resources, tourist areas, etc.), meaning place only matters in the sense that it offers what the creative class desires: access to other talented people, entertainment and rich cultural amenities (Florida, 49).

While Florida’s thesis on attracting the creative class for economic growth was the predominant theory on this issue for several years, recently other studies have challenged his position. They claim that the presence of the creative class is more likely an indication of economic well being rather than a factor spurring economic growth (Reese, et al., 103). A study done by Reese, Faist and Sands challenges Florida’s definitions and measurements of
“tolerance”, “high-tech employment” and “cultural amenities” as prerequisites for the emergence of a creative class as vague and unreliable factors. They noted that the indicators too are highly correlated statistically but still do not correlate with economic growth (Reese, et al., 101). They concluded that entertainment and cultural amenities are a better measurement of the presence of creative class than high-tech employment. The authors additionally concluded that the most reliable factors for economic health, but not necessarily growth, were measurements of creative employment, same-sex households and proximity to a university (Reese, et al., 99).

**Colleges as Creative Capital**

From the beginnings of academic institutions until today, colleges and universities have drawn large numbers of uniquely creative and innovative individuals. They become hubs for academics, scientists, and artists who might not have another place to feasibly practice their craft in the surrounding areas (McCulloch-Lovell 2006). Additionally, these institutions draw a range of students who are interested in pursuing or learning more about these creative activities. Students are eager for practical experience and application of the skills they are learning and thus represent an important group to consider when developing an economy that engages knowledge workers and the creative class (McCulloch-Lovell 2006).

Colleges and universities are able to draw upon their niche specialists and access to funding in ways that can benefit the entire community. For example, Williams College partnered with the city of North Adams in the creation of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (McCulloch-Lovell 2006). In 1985, the town lost nearly 4,000 jobs after the Sprague Electric Company was shut down, a staggering number considering the town only had a population of 18,000 (McCulloch-Lovell). The addition of the art museum is credited for catalyzing change in
the local economy, bringing in 44 more businesses and adding 255 jobs to the city (McCulloch-Lovell). All told, the effects of the art museum increased employment by 13%. Such partnerships depend on the special skills, interests, and funds of colleges and universities, and if utilized can greatly contribute to the economy of the local community.

Town-Gown Theories

One theory essential to understanding the relationship between Northfield and St. Olaf College is that of “Town-Gown” relations. Students participate in the economy of the town through purchasing groceries, getting haircuts, visiting restaurants or engaging in other economic exchanges. However, students, who are usually not permanent members of the community, tend to shrug off many of the responsibilities of town citizenship or do not become involved with in-town activities. This may be due to the fact that students tend to be interested in participating in activities on their home campus. Community members may engage in some events hosted by the college or university, for example concerts, theater performances or guest speakers, but on the whole, the two groups do not mix. St. Olaf College also has a geographic challenge: the college is elevated on a hill separate from the town and this creates a natural barrier that keeps the two groups relatively divided. This town-gown division is a reality for many students and this is illustrated through the description of life on the hill as being in the “St. Olaf Bubble”.

American secondary education today lends itself well to a separation between town and college through the construction of the college campus. This reality creates the sensation of living in a “bubble” that many St. Olaf students and alumni describe. Beginning in the 1940s, and even earlier in the case of St. Olaf, the campus model began to spread across secondary education institutions in the United States (Bruning et al. 2006). College campuses became self-
sufficient “cities” upon which students could eat, sleep, study and socialize. They adopted unique campus cultures, oftentimes rooted in beliefs or ideologies that differed considerably from those practiced by community members.

In the specific case of St. Olaf College, economic tensions further separate it from some members of the Northfield community. St. Olaf College is a private, nonprofit institution and is thus exempt from paying property taxes to the city of Northfield. Many students may be oblivious to this economic exchange, but local taxpayers are not. While this is in accordance with US law, for St. Olaf College it nonetheless relieves the institution of some of the responsibilities of community membership. Some perceive that this symbolic economic divide further separates the world of the “gowns” from that of the “town”. Some universities and colleges are attempting to reverse that trend by the adoption of practices, such as PILOT (payment-in-lieu-of-taxes) or SILOT (services-in-lieu-of-taxes), in which institutions agree to provide the town with a sum of money or free services in exchange for exemption from taxation (Steinkamp 24). Pittsburg State College helped to reinvigorate a main street by installing a safe playground for neighborhood children, and, in return, the community was supportive of development projects stemming from the campus (Steinkamp 24). Acts such as these provide both parties with incentives to work more closely together.

Previous research outlines possible tactics that could bridge the divide between the “townies” and “gownies”. From the perspective of the educational system, colleges could be more proactive in bringing community members to campus (Bruning et al. 2006). Oftentimes, events that are open to the public are not visibly advertised, are glossed over by community members, or the types of programming aren’t of interest to the greater population (partly due to the different culture and ideology of the college from the town). If the College were to take
greater and more creative initiatives to make spending time on campus more accessible and enjoyable to community members, then a stronger relationship with students could perhaps be fostered. The college or university can also provide goods or services that are open for the public to take advantage of (Bruning et al. 2006). St. Olaf College does this by offering public hours at the Rolvaag Library and the Tostrud Center for Recreation. Finding other ways to promote and share institutional resources with the general public will further enhance relations between the two groups.

Methods

In conducting our research with the NDDC, we used a variety of ethnographic research tools to collect information with our target subjects. Before beginning active research, however, we successfully filled out and completed the standard IRB form needed to conduct research on human subjects. As our research was relatively low-risk, we did not need to receive further approval outside of the Sociology/Anthropology department. Upon the approval of the IRB form we were able to move ahead and begin the interview process.

Our target population was St. Olaf College alumni residing in Northfield, MN. We initiated contact with alumni through our community partner Ross Currier, the alumni database, through our own social networks, and through connections given to us by our interviewees. Contact was initiated by our group through emails to the alumni, followed by a personal phone call ten days later for those who did not respond. Using this method we were able to meet with 34 alumni from April 13th until May 15th. To obtain information on our research topic, we utilized techniques of interview, specifically in-person, telephone and email interviews. These were typically performed in pairs, although many were conducted individually, and notes were
taken by the researchers using a pen and paper to record the information. These interviews lasted from 30-60 minutes, although some ran longer. Interviewees were asked questions pertaining to their background (place of origin, reason for attending St. Olaf,

To expand the scope of our data we also sent out an electronic survey to the 2012 graduating class of St. Olaf College. Our initial plan was to use the St. Olaf email alias and *formcreator*, an online survey creator administered through St. Olaf College, in order to access the entire senior class. Our plans were thwarted, however, by the Director for Institutional Research who instead prioritized another survey for the Center for Experiential Learning, ironically an institution in part dedicated to civic engagement projects like ours. They claimed that since they were already doing a survey of seniors, and that any more than one survey targeting the senior population would likely create confusion, that theirs trumped the one desired by the NDDC.

In lieu of these circumstances, on May 4th, 2012, we sent out a survey created on *surveymonkey*, through facebook.com, to 265 St. Olaf College seniors. We were not able to administer the survey to a random sample as we instead were tapping into our personal social networks. However we nonetheless were able to reach a wide range of groups of seniors on campus.

The electronic survey included the following questions:

1. *What is your major?*

2. *Have you been involved in the Northfield community through internships, off-campus jobs, volunteer work, etc? If so, for how long and with what businesses or organizations?*

3. *As of now, what are your immediate plans for after graduation? What do you hope to be doing in five to ten years?*
4. Would you consider living in Northfield sometime in your future? If so, what are the major draws of Northfield? If not, why would you prefer another location?

47 students responded to the survey; while our results are too few to be able to apply to the entire student body, we did receive some insight into senior students’ plans for their futures. Research group members read through the answers and grouped them through identifying trends, common words, phrases, and ideas.

**Findings and Analysis**

**Quality of Life**

Among the alumni interviewed, the majority reported that Northfield is an attractive place to live and that it provides a high quality of life for both children and for adults. The majority of alumni with children were quick to emphasize that family life was a major consideration in their decision to return. Alumni with children generally stated that Northfield is a safe town with an impressive public education system. Parents stated that they feel comfortable letting their children partake in activities away from home, such as playing with neighborhood friends, going to schoolmates’ homes, and riding their bikes around the neighborhood and to school. We found that the majority of alumni with children feel that the public schools in Northfield offer a high quality education and live up to their reputation of providing safe school environments. One alumnus stated, “the city (Minneapolis/St. Paul) schools aren’t guaranteed to be safe and adequate for kids”. This particular alumnus said that she and her husband based their entire reason for moving from Minneapolis to Northfield on this issue. In addition to this, the price of housing in Northfield is more affordable than the housing in Minneapolis/St. Paul that is
adjacent to high caliber school districts.

Alumni stated that there are many opportunities to bring children to activities and events in Northfield. The two colleges provide many opportunities for families to enjoy inexpensive events such as football games, theater performances, art shows, and concerts. Additionally, Carleton’s Cowling Arboretum is open year around and is an ideal place to fish, hike, run, or simply enjoy the outdoors. Many alumni expressed that they enjoy having the colleges around because of the high-quality, affordable events they provide for the community. One alumnus stated,

One thing that I really enjoy about Northfield is the easy access to the colleges. I recently went to a St. Olaf production just last week. I took my oldest daughter along and it only cost four dollars for the both of us. There are always events like that happening on both of the college campuses. Since my children were young, I have been taking them to the music and theatre performance, and sports games at both colleges.

In sum, all alumni, with and without children, expressed their appreciation for the town’s unique culture stemming from the influence of the two colleges.

Many of the alumni, both those with and without children, stated that Northfield is a unique small town and provides a high quality of life for adults. One alumnus stated,

Northfield is not like your average small town. This is mostly because of the diversity and different mindset. People have been exposed to many different things and discussions are interesting. The colleges have a lot to do with this, as they have attracted many educated people to this town, resulting in many organizations and events, along with uniquely diverse demographic.
For example, if you wanted to have a book club in Northfield, the possibilities are endless for the number of people you could invite. The number of people who would join in other small towns would be much lower. This sentiment held true for another interviewee, who stated, “I really appreciate the peer group here. There are shared values and interests. In fact, I have been in a book club with 11 men for 18 years.”

Through our interviews, we found that many alumni feel that Northfield has the cultural qualities of the Twin Cities, but at a lower price. This vibrant culture of Northfield displays itself through local events and attractions, such as the Arts Guild, which is housed in two historic buildings, the Japanese garden and arboretum at Carleton, and the Farmers Market at Riverside Park. Other attractions include the Riverwalk and the Historical Society and Museum. Nonetheless, most interviewed expressed their appreciation for Northfield’s proximity to the cities. Northfield is conveniently located just forty-five minutes from the Twin Cities and this provides alumni with the opportunity to easily expose themselves to all the city has to offer without living in a busy metropolitan environment. Additionally, the Twin Cities are close enough to visit for major cultural events that would otherwise not come to Northfield, such as Broadway shows, Twins games or large concerts. Others stated that they appreciate that Northfield is a calm, quiet town contrary to the hectic nature of the cities. As one alumnus stated with appreciation, “Northfield is close to the cities, but ain’t the cities.”

We found through our interviews that the biggest draw to living in Northfield is the high quality of life it offers for families. The safe environment, reputable education system, and abundance of events for families is especially appreciated by many of the alumni with children. Most stated that these factors were the primary reasons for their return. Many alumni, both with
or without children, expressed great fondness of Northfield’s unique culture, stating it is unusual for a small town. This culture was primarily accredited to the two colleges and their abilities to draw an educated and diverse demographic to Northfield. Lastly, Northfield is in close proximity to the Twin Cities, so Northfield residents are able to easily enjoy the cultural amenities of city life and then return home to a serene, calm environment. All of these factors contribute to a high quality of life and have worked to influence alumni to return and live in Northfield.

Alumni Living and Working Within Northfield

Many of the alumni who have moved to Northfield to live and work did not consider returning until the opportunity presented itself. That is, the vast majority returned five to ten years after graduation. As one interviewee stated, “life choices” brought her back to Northfield. Another alumnus that we interviewed moved from St. Olaf College to Minneapolis/St. Paul and then to Oregon before finally settling in Northfield. Her husband, who is a graduate of Augustana College, was offered a job in Northfield and they decided to relocate to promote his career. They have lived in the town for three years and, although she said she had not expected to return to Northfield as soon as she did, she is happy and has been successful in professional painting, yoga instruction, and her massage therapy business.

One factor that has contributed to the success of her business is the fact that all of her clients came to her through word of mouth and social networking in Northfield. Due to these social networks, she has not spent any money on advertising and she believes that this is possible because of the tight-knit community that exists in Northfield. This alumnus is also the only person in her business and because of word of mouth she never has to work with strangers, something that she says is particularly important to her as a massage therapist in order to feel
safe where she works. She also stated that she believes both Carleton College and St. Olaf College attract and foster an art-friendly environment that makes it easier for her to be a painter. There are many other artists here as well as people who appreciate and are willing and able to spend money on art in Northfield.

While many alumni have been successful in Northfield, not all alumni who return to start businesses have shared in that success. One of the alumnus we interviewed, a local potter, has twice tried to open stores in Northfield. The first of his businesses went very well for two years (1988-1989). His business became very popular and people would even come down from the Twin Cities on Saturday mornings during the few months. But, due to a recession in 1990-1991, clients’ interest began to wane. His second business lasted only for a few months. In his interview he said that he felt that there weren’t enough people in Northfield to support his business, especially because it was a pottery store and thus did not sell essential items. There is also an abundance of pottery selections in the Twin Cities, making it unnecessary for people to travel down to Northfield from Minneapolis/St. Paul. The interviewee also spoke about how the Riverwalk market, an art market occurring every Saturday morning along the Cannon River that began three years ago, was initially very encouraging as it gave local artists an opportunity to sell their goods on a weekly basis. However, he has backed away from it recently as fewer people in Northfield attend. He surmised that the lack in attendance is because the “newness” of Riverwalk is wearing off. Similar to the situation in which both of his businesses closed down in the early 1990s, he believes that people who live here and commute to other communities for work aren’t interested in supporting local artists in the Riverwalk. Additionally he is concerned that the current economic depression makes it difficult for community members to spend money on pottery and art.
Nonetheless, this alumnus believes that success could be realized if music and visual arts were coordinated, allowing for more publicity and coordinated advertising. He also mentioned that the location of Riverwalk sometimes makes it hard to see to a passersby. A better location could increase the Riverwalk’s viability. The Riverwalk could be an important economic support in Northfield as there is a strong art community here due to the colleges. But the artists we interviewed have numerous jobs, like our yoga instructor/massage therapist/painter. It seems that artists cannot support a store on their own, but the collectivity of the Riverwalk is an important way to tap into the economic potential of the art community.

When Alumni talked about the costs of owning a business in Northfield they typically stressed how it compares to owning the same business in the Twin Cities. For example, the massage therapist/painter alumnus mentioned earlier stated that the overhead costs for her business are cheaper in Northfield when compared to the cities, making Northfield an attractive locale for her business. The potter we talked to also stayed in Northfield because he did not have to undergo difficulties and expenses of starting up pottery in the Twin Cities.

The alumni interviewed would also compare their business in Northfield to running a business in Faribault or another surrounding area. For example, a practicing dentist alumnus noted that there is a higher market for dental care in Northfield than other small towns because a larger percentage of the population has enough disposable income to be able to afford dental care. However, he does clarify that dentistry is less competitive in Northfield than in Minneapolis and that he therefore charges less for his services.

There are some alumni who own businesses in Northfield and have customers both inside and outside of Northfield. One alumnus who has lived in Northfield for six years with her husband is a musician at one of the local bars and runs a graphic design business out of her
home. She does have a few clients that reside in Northfield, but her most lucrative client lives in Denver, CO. Although little of her business takes place in Northfield, she and her husband specifically chose to move to Northfield because they wanted to live in a small town. Her sentiments about what Northfield has to offer echo what many of the alumni who work here discussed with us. The colleges attract art and culture and provide a “great vibe” for the artists who live in Northfield.

Creative Class Alumni with Non-Northfield Clients

In a time of rapid commutes to the Twin Cities area and the global communication potential of the Internet, the majority of the creative class, St. Olaf alumni living in Northfield, have no actual clients in town. That is, they are not contributing directly to any economic growth in Northfield through their business. For example, a life coach who works primarily for law firms can make $150 per hour with large firms in Minneapolis, as compared to $50-75 per hour in Northfield. Additionally, the previously mentioned graphic design artist states that while there is a market for her work in Northfield, it is simply too small to be readily reliable, and for this reason she works with a large client in Denver, CO, directly out of her basement studio. The owner of a medical supplies company states there is no market for his supplies in Northfield and therefore has clients all over the Midwest.

This phenomena highlights that in an interconnected world, creative class individuals are not limited to the strict geographic limits of their hometown. Our study shows that while the presence of a creative class certainly reflects economic well being, it may not be the best option for economic growth. That is, while the creative class is an important part of the economy it should not be relied upon as the sole strategy for economic growth. Their presence nonetheless is
a good indicator of economic health: a high standard of living, an intelligent community, proximity to quality education and cultural amenities all attract and sustain creative class individuals and are reflective of economic well being (Florida; Reese et al.).

What prompted many creative class alumni to return to Northfield was not an economic incentive, but rather the allure of a highly educated, “cultured” town ideal for raising a family. As previously noted, alumni listed the quality public education system, relatively affordable housing, attractive downtown, intelligent community, and proximity to two elite liberal arts colleges that host art, music, athletic and theater events as primary attractions to living in Northfield. It is important to note that these individuals, due to the flexibility of their creative class employment, could live anywhere in the U.S. but still choose to make Northfield their home. Additionally, while they may not be directly contributing to economic growth of Northfield through their employment, they still contribute greatly to the town’s social community and the economy through taxes and by visiting local establishments.

_Elitism and Small Town Business_

Many of the Alumni that we interviewed described and valued Northfield as an “intelligent community”. Additionally, an overwhelmingly majority of Northfield residents who are not alumni of St. Olaf College or Carleton College possesses undergraduate and graduate degrees. As one interviewee said, “With that much education, it (education) is a characteristic of human capital that differentiates us from other communities.”

The large number of intelligent and highly educated residents of Northfield also ensures its population is able argue well and make their opinions known. One alumnus supported this phenomenon, stating, “People in this town are very smart and know how to make
arguments.” One example frequently mentioned concerned a skate park that the youth of Northfield have been raising money for. According to interviews with alumni, the funds have been raised for the park but the committees can’t seem to find a space for it. “No one wants these scruffy kids in their backyard,” reported one interviewee. Reports from alumni seem to prove that a dense population of intelligent and scholarly-minded people can lead to a slowing of decision-making processes within the community.

One highly contested idea is the “elitist” nature of Northfield, mostly regarding business. Many alumni seem to believe that Northfield is elitist in regards to the specific types of businesses that are let in, i.e. mom ‘n pop shops and other locally owned businesses centered primarily in the service sector. Additionally, alumni report that Northfield is reluctant to allow larger “big-box” companies and chain stores into the town. A prime example of this is the debate over the new Target, a national multi-purpose goods chain. The introduction of a national chain into the local economy of Northfield was met with mixed reactions. Alumni report that many residents strongly supported Target for the money it would bring into the city while others worried that the chain would harm the local, long-time shops in the downtown area. In fact, the NDDC itself was founded in response to the new Target and some community members’ desire to preserve and empower small shops and local interests, specifically the historic downtown areas. In contrast, one alumnus who supported Target states, “everyone would rather be cute than have a big-box retailer, but if you don’t have big box retailers, then you don’t have retail.”

Several of the Alumni were against the introduction of Target. Of the mom ‘n pop shops that fill Division Street, few last for an extended period of time. “It’s like a revolving door of new stores. One comes in, goes out of business and before you blink a new one is in its place,” one concerned alumnus stated. Another alumnus argued that the large corporations in Northfield
would be an added and unnecessary competition for the small businesses. Upon the arrival of
Target in Northfield, Jacobson, a long-standing locally owned general store, and several other
hardware shops went out of business. Even though community members knew specific aspects
of the local economy would most likely be harmed, Target was allowed in Northfield to satisfy
the members of the community who greatly desired it. The decision to bring Target into
Northfield was a contentious one and divided the community.

Some residents feel that Northfield is actively turning down manufacturing and other
“blue-collar” businesses, but according to the NDDC this is not true. The NDDC proposed that
various factors in Northfield are discouraging larger businesses. The first factor is the cost of
property in Northfield: the NDDC states it is two to three times more expensive than in
surrounding communities. A large company would most likely decide to build in Faribault, a
cheaper community, over Northfield in order to save money. The second factor is that Northfield
has a very complicated bureaucratic system that surrounds economic development. This system
requires new businesses to go through four separate organizations: the City Council, Chamber of
Commerce, EDA and the NEC. Many of the alumni that were interviewed commented in
frustration on the long and complex process they must go through to get various projects
approved. With the time it takes to complete the process, a larger company would most likely
choose a location where they could start more quickly.

Ross Currier, our community partner, presented an alternate economic perspective on
Northfield. He argued that the town was currently functioning on a “Post-Fordism” economic
model. This means that rather than several large businesses controlling most of the economy, as
could be found in a “Fordism” economic model, the economy is based in many small businesses
all hiring ten to twelve people.
There was disagreement amongst our interviewees as to which economic model is most effective. One interviewee was noted as saying that many people are used to several large businesses running the economy and are uncomfortable with the economy depending on small businesses. The uncertainty about the current economic model and the disagreement over what is most effective is a considerable source of conflict in the issue over elitism in Northfield.

*Town-Gown Relationship*

Investigating the relationship between St. Olaf and the Northfield community was an important element of our research. Our community partner, Ross Currier, was curious to understand if the college has an active role in bringing alumni back to Northfield. Literature suggests that there can be tension between educational institutions and community members due to financial reasons (institutions of education do not pay property taxes to the city it resides in) or social differences (cultural differences between the large group of students and community members) (Steinkamp, 24). In interviews from alumni, however, these tensions did not seem to exist. The impressions of interviewees reflected the sentiment that Northfield community members think highly of St. Olaf College and Carleton College. One interviewee stated that the colleges bring interesting, creative, and educated people to Northfield, thus creating a desirable population. Another interviewee stated that the colleges provided a plethora of enjoyable activities for their family to take part in, these activities ranging from walking up to the Cage at St. Olaf and eating ice cream, going to summertime concerts, or meeting friends at football games. Additionally, the financial town-gown tensions appear to be less present in Northfield than the literature suggested it was in other communities (Bruning et al. 2006). Few interviewees mentioned the property tax issue, and those that did were not openly upset about the fact St. Olaf
College does not pay property taxes to the city.

St. Olaf alumni seemed to be open to and excited to working with current St. Olaf students, through helping them network, mentoring, or providing internship opportunities. Some but not all stated that they had actively been a mentor to a St. Olaf student at some point in their career. Most of these alumni admitted that, when they were students, they did not have the option to partake in internships as they were not important to career establishment in the way they have been in recent decades. They also explained that volunteer opportunities and off-campus jobs were not as large a part of campus culture as they are today. Alumni generally seemed to encourage more student involvement in the community. One alumnus told of an experience when he was speaking to a St. Olaf senior and was shocked to discover that the senior had never been to downtown Northfield before. He suggested that St. Olaf College offer more opportunities to engage the community as a part of their academic experiences, i.e. through civic engagement classes. He also suggested the colleges or the city of Northfield provide tours of the downtown for first year students during their first week of college, thereby encouraging a relationship between students and the downtown.

St. Olaf College is also working to connect students and community members in various ways. In the last decade, classes have been offered that connect students to community members while working on an academic project. The College also offers its students career counseling services through the Center for Experiential Learning (CEL). Here students have access to the Alumni Directory, a directory that allows students to conduct detailed searches on participating alumni who may be able to assist them in their career path. The CEL also offers grants and scholarships for internship and entrepreneurial opportunities.
Senior Survey Results and Analysis

Part of our research was focused on the town-gown relationship between St. Olaf and the Northfield community. We were interested in knowing how this relationship may have changed throughout the years, so we compared the community involvement of a sample of the current senior class with the alumnus we interviewed. We sent out a survey via Facebook and e-mail to a sample of current seniors at St. Olaf College. We received forty-seven responses and of those respondents 72% have been involved in the Northfield community at some point in their academic career, either through internships, volunteering, or paid jobs. Most involvement was extended and in depth experiences in the community. This contrasts sharply to the involvement of the alumni in the Northfield community during their college careers, who the majority of which, had no connections with the town.

In regards to the future plans of St. Olaf student, of those who responded, 40% plan to go on in their schooling. Only 4% of the students surveyed are planning to stay in Northfield post graduation, however they expressed the desire to eventually move to a new town. 32% of the students will be going directly into the workforce. At the time the survey was conducted 26% students had no definite plans of employment or further schooling, all but one indicated they were in the process, or would be soon, of applying for employment.

This survey illustrates many important trends. First, the survey suggest it is common for Ole seniors to seek out travel and study opportunities, as well as job experiences outside of Northfield. This is similar to past alumni’s attitudes at the time of their graduations. The majority of the alumni we interviewed stated they had no interest in staying or returning to Northfield at the time of graduation. In fact, many stated they were surprised they ended up settling in Northfield with their families. Many alumni typically spent five to ten years traveling
or studying in other parts of the country before they returned and settled in Northfield. Therefore, the attitudes and opinions of the senior class at this point in their lives is not necessarily indicative or conclusive evidence of whether they will return to Northfield in the future.

According to our research, one of the strongest attractions of Northfield is the quality of family life and the opportunities for their children that the community provides. With this information in mind, it is not surprising that Northfield does not attract numerous recent college graduates since many students are not likely to consider these aspects of a community at this point in their lives. In fact, one of the two students who plan to stay in Northfield is married and has a child, which may be a contributing factor to her decision to stay in Northfield post graduation.

Finally, as discussed earlier, there are theories that argue more integration between towns and colleges will benefit both communities. St. Olaf College has been actively working to improve civic engagement and the involvement of students in the community. The data from our survey indicates the college has been successful in building these relationships. As shown by our survey many students have been actively engaged in Northfield during their time at St. Olaf. However, because this is a relatively recent trend it is inconclusive whether this increased participation in the community fosters connections that may eventually draw alumni back to the community in the future.

Conclusions

Our interviews revealed that the majority of creative class members interviewed for this project did not return due to economic opportunities available to them. Rather, the majority returned five to ten years after graduation, usually with plans to start a family and raise their
children in the safe, and vibrant community that Northfield provides. They cited the attraction of a small, educated town, close to the Twin Cities but still isolated enough to resist “suburbia” and maintain its downtown feel. Additionally, they listed quality public education, affordable housing, proximity to family, and the cultural amenities provided by two liberal arts colleges as major draws.

Due to the feasible commute to the Minneapolis / St. Paul area, the global communication potential of the Internet, and the flexibility of many creative class careers, the majority of those interviewed have few or no clients in Northfield. They find more lucrative markets outside the boundaries of the town and conduct their business elsewhere. This highlights the power of cultural amenities a small college town has to offer as it offsets potential economic hindrances. In other words, the creative class returned to live in Northfield for reasons other than strong, local markets for their knowledge-based careers and they were able to pursue their careers through accessing outside markets.

Of those who did choose Northfield for economic reasons concerning their business, they cited that in comparison to other small towns, Northfield has a substantially greater market of individuals who could afford their services. While they may have been able to earn more in an urban environment, their preference for a smaller, more community-based environment meant that Northfield was the place in which they could balance personal lifestyle preferences while still making the most economically. Again, these individuals cited the presence of the colleges as primary factors attracting the middle/upper class clientele base their services depended on.

Nearly every St. Olaf alum interviewed stated that they cherished the intellectual community of Northfield. While the opportunities offered due to the highly educated population are abundant, there were some accusations of elitism in Northfield, specifically surrounding the
city government. Some alumni perceived this to be an obstruction to business, citing the slow bureaucratic process caused by the stubbornness of individuals on city councils, committees and/or organizations. While some argue that other factors such as the high cost of land and the inefficient, often unconnected bureaucratic civil structures of Northfield is what makes it so difficult to start a business or allow, for example, the introduction of a manufacturing plant, others interpret the situation as the educated elite wanting their opinions heard, backing them up well and refusing to compromise, which in turn, they argue, ultimately harms the economy.

The isolated college campus of St. Olaf College, resting on a hill away from downtown, has caused both current and past St. Olaf students to describe a “bubble” separating them from Northfield. With this in mind, the NDDC wanted to analyze at how past relations between alumni and Northfield may have influenced their return. We discovered that the overwhelming majority of alumni had no formal connections with Northfield via internships, volunteer or work experiences, or civic engagement programs during their student careers, primarily due to the fact that these were not deemed important in higher education until recently. In comparison, 72% of the graduating senior respondents said they had interacted with Northfield agencies through one of the previously mentioned methods. This suggests that the “bubble” may be breaking down and that the NDDC and CEL should continue their efforts to unite students and Northfield. That said, it remains uncertain whether this will attract future alumni to Northfield, but it is a step forward towards fostering better town-gown relationships.

**Implications for the NDDC and St. Olaf College**

Our research suggests that the creative class may not be the best strategy for economic growth of Northfield because the majority of our interviewees did not directly contribute to the
Northfield economy. That is not to say that these individuals do not contribute to the social life in Northfield, or that the NDDC should discourage their presence, only that pursuing the creative class as the only strategic plan for Northfield’s economy would likely produce few positive results.

If the NDDC were to advertise Northfield they should do so as an attractive place to raise a family with quality public education, a thriving downtown and a wide range of cultural amenities due to the proximity of two elite liberal art colleges. For a small town, Northfield has a high concentration of individuals that can afford creative class services so there is an economic incentive for creative class enterprise in comparison to other small towns. Nonetheless, Northfield still cannot compete with urban markets for creative class employment and business. Therefore, if creative class individuals are determined to live in a small town, the NDDC should advertise that the Twin Cities are close enough to access their markets.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on what we were able to accomplish in our research, there exist several areas that we were not able to fully delve into and feel would be good topics for future research.

We believe that there are richer opinions to be found in Northfield, which could be accessed by interviewing a more diverse group of people. We feel that the business owners of Northfield, whether or not they are alumni of St. Olaf and Carleton, are important to the community in which they live and could provide a more experiential insight to the economy and businesses of Northfield. Since we solely interviewed alumni of St. Olaf and Carleton, who may or may not be directly involved with the businesses in Northfield, It is important to get the opinions of those who are. Additionally, alumni of St. Olaf and Carleton aren’t the only alumni
or members of the ‘creative class’ that can be found in Northfield. A majority of the Northfield population has received high levels of education and is thus considered to be of the ‘creative class’. It would be important to interview more of the ‘creative class’ in Northfield, in order to truly understand what would draw them here. A third group for interview would be city government officials as they would be a key group to learn from to better understand the strategies of the town and how businesses are perceived.

Another interesting study could be a comparison between St. Olaf and Carleton. Many Alumni spoke about Carleton being more visible in the community. It would be interesting to see if the ‘bubble’ in which St. Olaf is described as, has a large effect on the involvement in the community. Additionally, it would be important to compare this idea of a bubble to Carleton, to see if they are also affected by it.

Finally, one last possibility for furthering the research that we did here, would be to compare Northfield to surrounding areas, such as Faribault. It would be interesting to see if there are great differences between these community neighbors, including both social identities and economic industry. There may also be some interesting results if one were to compare the government leaders of these two communities as well.
Bibliography


Appendix I

Interview Questions:

1. Where are you from originally?
2. How long have you lived in Northfield?
3. What do you do for a living?

College

1. How did you come to choose to attend St. Olaf?
2. What was your major, and/or concentration?
3. Did you volunteer or otherwise get involved in the Northfield community? If so, how and when (i.e. first year, sophomore, etc.)?
4. How well did you know Northfield as a town and community while you were a student here?
5. Were there specific memories from your time as an undergraduate student that weighed or influenced your decision to return?

Career and Northfield

1. What led you to your current career?
2. What was your most meaningful experience(s) in college for your career?
3. Why did you decide to locate in the Northfield area?
4. What about Northfield has caused your business/employment/job experience to be successful?
5. What do you like about living/working in Northfield?
6. What would enhance your experience in Northfield?
7. Have you ever thought of leaving Northfield? If so, why?

Any other thoughts or comments?
Questions for survey for senior St. Olaf students:

1. What is your major?

2. Have you been involved in the Northfield community through internships, off-campus jobs, volunteer work, etc? If so, for how long and with what businesses or organizations?

3. As of now, what are your immediate plans for after graduation? What do you hope to be doing in five to ten years?

4. Would you consider living in Northfield sometime in your future? If so, what are the major draws of Northfield? If not, why would you prefer another location?